THE EGYPTIAN THEATRE

Cultural Encounters 1

by

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Dedication

For people of my real country,
theatre, whatever their nationality,
culture, or faith



PREFACE

What happens to plays when presented in cultural contexts other than their own? – to dramatic texts in translation, or when adapted to suit a different culture? How are they approached by directors and perceived by spectators? What expectations do audiences bring to them, or to visiting performances in alien languages? How are these expectations formed? through what agencies? and how do they affect perception and reception?.

These questions, indirectly addressed through concrete, eye-witness reports on specific productions, local and otherwise, of foreign plays, are the focus of the present work which covers a wide range of intercultural theatrical events in Egypt and the Arab world over the period from 1993 to 2004. In many cases, the productions are compared to earlier ones, establishing telling comparisons, or the history of a particular foreign text or author on the Egyptian stage is briefly sketched to provide background information to a particular production. This helps to expand the temporal scope of the book beyond the specific period it covers without making any claims to a comprehensive coverage of the subject.

There is no claim to absolute objectivity either, if such a thing is at all possible. The accounts of the intercultural theatrical events covered here were processed through my own perception and are, therefore, inevitably coloured by my own experience, cultural background, cast of mind and ideological predilections. There is in them, however, or so I hope, enough objective information, description and assessment to correct the balance.

For convenience, the material was divided between two volumes (one would have been too bulky) and arranged both geographically and chronologically. A side-benefit of this arrangement is the insight it provides into the intensity, range and direction of the encounters with foreign drama in the period covered.

What we term modern Egyptian theatre was born out of a cultural encounter with Europe, its dramatic and theatrical traditions, and ever since, its course has been influenced and partially shaped by constant exposure to western, as well as other cultural/theatrical practices. Hopefully, this will continue to be the case.

Nehad Selaiha
Cairo, 2004

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* Henceforth the abbreviation will be used throughout.

The Greeks*

* Two Interesting Egyptian reworkings of the Phaedra and Oedipus themes are covered in my earlier book: *The Egyptian Theatre: New Directions*, Cairo, General Egyptian Book Org. (GEBO), 2003, pp. 229-232 and 243-244.

Prancing Antigone:

An Egyptian modern dance version of Sophocles's play at the Small Hall of the Opera House*

Football to the right of us, football to the left ... If Shakespeare were alive today, he would probably modify his famous line to read: All the world is a ball! At least this is how I feel whenever I walk into my living room, or any other living room for that matter, to find it full of little men in coloured shorts scurrying around and chasing a tiny white ball on a green screen — and a big blank in the theatre pages.

In desperation, I rush out, and take to the street in search of sanity. Mercifully they are empty (eerily so; everyone is at home staring saucer-eyed at the hypnotic, flickering screen). I visit all the theatres one by one, to find them all closed, with the dust comfortably settling down on them. Private or public, none of them intends to put its lights on before the World Cup is over. But shouldn't they be rehearsing something?

Fortunately, at the Small Hall of the Opera House I ran into *Antigone* in a modern dance version of the old Sophoclean play. The occasion is Hellenic Day celebrated by the Greek Embassy in Cairo. After stirring speeches by Tariq Ali Hassan and Naim Attiya and over an hour of poetry reading — in Arabic, English and Greek — it is time for theatre. Our players are a troupe of amateurs who are attached to the Atelier and the Museum of Fine Arts in Alexandria and call themselves

* 23.6.1994. In Arabic.

the Ritual Theatre. And graphic, they certainly were. The stage set (by Hazim Mitwali), a tent-like rope net hung around with masks, had a primitive, savage look about it which seems to take Sophocles' text further back into history than classical times and Attica. Of words, there was the absolute bare minimum; each part was stripped down to a few telling sentences and the rest translated into dance. The music (composed by Hisham Abdel-Qadir) and costumes (by Nisreen Saed) partook of the general primitivism but the choreography needed more attention. Occasionally one could glimpse a pattern, a logic, but it soon sank under a heap of superfluous details — some of them quite enigmatic and puzzling as regards their origins. But the show was refreshing and modestly innovative and struck a deeper chord of truth in the play than any other production I have seen in Egypt. Could it be that stylised dancing is better suited to the classics than naturalistic acting? Whatever the case, one thing is certain, the Biennale's *Antigone* (directed by Ramadan Abdel-Hafiz) brightened my week.

Prancing Electra:

Euripides' *Electra* in Alexandria*

It was a positive relief having to miss the annual Egyptian theatre gala evening last friday. I had seen a dress rehearsal of the performance prepared especially for the occasion and was dreading the prospect of having to repeat the experience out of courtesy. *I Say to You*, a collage of poems and dramatic scenes from the works of Salah Abdel Sabour (arranged by his widow, Samiha Ghaleb and directed by Sa'd Ardash) proved an eloquent illustration of what Peter Brook termed 'the deadly theatre'. Ponderous without passion and grandoise without real dignity, it seemed intended to corroborate the minister of culture's recent denunciation of the mainstream Egyptian theatre.

Cornered some weeks ago at the Press Syndicate into commenting on the deplorable performance of the state-run theatre sector in recent years, he admitted, with devastating frankness, that he had given up on it; he could neither dismantle it nor put it to rights. With vexing, unruffled equanimity he went on to compare it to a rotting, decaying tree whose collapse was (hopefully!) imminent. He pinned his hopes, he said, on the younger generation, meaning, of course, the free theatre groups. Oblivious of the fact, bitterly ironical, that these beleagured groups have failed to hold their annual festival this year, he stoutly declared that they alone could rejuvenate the Egyptian theatre. More ironical still was the announcement that very soon many of those free groups would come under the umbrella of the ministry through the financial sponsorship of the cultural development fund. About the

* 22.6.1995, In Arabic.

details of this project and the measure of independence it will allow the sponsored groups, the minister was disquietingly vague. When I appealed to Samir Gharib, the head of the fund, for more precise information, he proved equally unilluminating. We will have to wait and see.

The question of independence vis-a-vis financial help pursued me to Alexandria where I had been invited by the Greek cultural counsellor in Egypt, the well-known poet and writer Kostis Moskof, to attend a performance of Euripides's *Electra* by the Ritual Theater Group, sponsored by the Foundation for Hellenic Culture, and, more welcome still, to meet with the great Greek tragidienne Aspassia Papathanassiou who is best known for her frequent performances of Sophocles's *Electra*. Ms Papathanassiou was there not to perform, however, which was heart-breaking for me, but to conduct a five-day workshop on ancient Greek drama for the benefit of the lucky Ritual Theatre group. The group which was formed two years ago by Ramadan Abdel Hafiz, a philosophy graduate with long experience in the university theatre, was spotted by Moskof during one of their performances at the Russian Cultural Centre over a year ago; he offered to sponsor them for three productions of ancient Greek drama and ever since the group has dedicated itself to this project, producing first Sophocles's *Antigone* (which I saw at the small hall of the Opera House), then Aeschylus's *Agamemnon* (which I, unfortunately, missed) and, finally, Euripides's *Electra* which played at the Sayed Darwish theatre last week.

Both financially and culturally, the sponsorship has proved extremely beneficial to the group. Apart from inviting experts like Papathanassiou to communicate their experience to its members,

Moskof has arranged for the whole group to travel to Athens on 19th July to attend the Mediterranean Cultures Festival (held this year under the title "communication across the waters") and to perform their *Electra* at the Aetopoulio cultural centre there. The benefits, however, though substantial, carry with them, perhaps inevitably, a certain curtailment of the group's freedom. When I brought up this point with Moskof and Papathanassiou in the course of a conversation on the Egyptian theatre, they acknowledged its truth and suggested, by way of remedy, that in future the Foundation for Hellenic Culture would try to sponsor four productions, two of which would be left completely free for the group to decide upon.

The performance itself was moderately interesting. As in their two previous productions, the group approached *Electra* through movement and dance, reducing the spoken dialogue to the bare minimum. A lot of hard work has obviously gone into the making of the show, but director Ramadan Abdel Hafiz, though extremely imaginative, has had no training either as dancer or choreographer and the production betrays this lack. At times, the movement, which on the whole followed a circular pattern, seemed forced, naive or erratic and, technically, the performers still have a long way to go. There were some powerful scenes, however, like the opening ritualistic dance with the grotesquely masked papier-maché, scarecrow-like figures and the flight of Clytemnestra in front of Orestes. It is at such moments that one becomes convinced of the group's talent and the energy of their imagination. Hisham Abdel-Qadir's music was sufficiently dramatic but could have done with a hint of primitivism and some authentic Greek flavour. On the visual level, however, Ahmad El-Manawishi's set and constumes supplied this defficiency. The costumes, of rough, undyed

linen, communicated a sense of primitive ruggedness and the set, composed solely of the afore-mentioned papier-maché figures, plus five huge charchoal and pastel drawings on rough, brown paper, hanging at the back and representing scenes from various Greek tragedies in a style suggestive at once of Michelangelo and William Blake, was beautifully simple and highly evocative.

To perfect their tools and realize their full potential, The Ritual Theatre Group of Alexandria will continue to need the care and assistance of Moskof and his crew for a number of years. But they have made a good start and their seriousness, humility and capacity for hard work augur well for the future.

Poussi in Lysistrata's boots:
Aristophanes at Al-Rihani Theatre*

As with everything else, there are fashions in writers. Last year a hack playwright by the name of Yusef Ma'ati burst upon the commercial theatre scene with a rambling compilation of hackneyed sketches masquerading as a musical comedy and bearing the attractive title *Beauty and the Beasts*. It proved an instant hit, and no wonder: the beauty in question was film star Laila Eloui in the flesh. In the director's chair was Hussein Kamal, and he took no risks. He fully capitalised on Eloui's natural endowments, using them to inject into the limp and anaemic ghost of a text a strong dose of fortifying and voluptuous dance. The result, quite predictably, was that curious hybrid theatrical formula that is fast becoming a permanent feature of the Egyptian theatre, a haphazard collection of trite, stereotypical comic sketches, sloppily strung together by a stale and puny plot. It is a sprawling formula which is apparently difficult to trim down to under three and half hours.

The success of *Beauty* (which is still running) has sent Mr Ma'ati's shares rocketing. This year two more film stars were tempted to try their luck with him: Ilham Shahin in *Bahlool fi Istanbul* (which I have yet to see — God help me), and Poussi in *La' Balaash Kidah* (None of That) which I had the *dis*pleasure of watching last week. The attendance was good, considering it was a Saturday. The arrival of 100,000 Arab tourists (mainly from Saudi Arabia and the Gulf) over the past three

* 27.7.1995, In Arabic.

weeks, as the newspapers reported, must have helped swell the number of victims; another important factor could be the end of the annual nightmare of Egyptian school exams. Thousands of Egyptian families have since fled the steaming capital. But those who stayed are bound to flock to the cinemas and theatres to relax and sooth their frayed nerves. This explains the strong Egyptian presence in the auditorium that night.

The unhappy event started at 10.30. The garish billboards and posters outside the tatty front of Al-Rihani theatre, with their gaudy fringe of winking, coloured bulbs, looked sufficiently ominous. I could remember a time when Emadeddin street was cleaner and brighter — a real boulevard and the home of light, pleasant entertainment. At 10pm, amid the hustle and bustle, when the glaring neon lights eclipse the faded charm and dignity of the few elegant buildings remaining, the street looks raddled and vulgar. But at 3am, the time when people usually totter out of its live shows, thoroughly sapped and rundown, it wears a dimsal, rueful look.

In the case of *None of That*, what happens between 10.30 and 2.30am (with one short interval of 15 minutes) is truly mind-boggling. To provide Poussi with a role that allows her sufficient scope to display her physical assets to the full while spuriously posing as a serious feminist, the ingenious Mr Ma'ati rampaged through three of Aristophanes's comedies — *Lysistrata, The Women at the Festival and The Women in Parliament* — ransacking and plundering them for plot and characters. He mixed what he purloined higgledy-piggledy, coming up with a weird succession of scenes. The general sex strike undertaken by Lysistrata and the women of Athens against their men serves as a launching pad, providing ample opportunities for bawdy humour and

sexual titillation. More often than not, however the dialogue was coarse and witless without being funny. The verbal humour was dull and lack-lustre and the physical contortions of the actresses ludicrous rather than erotic.

More offensive still was Mr Ma'ati's rank prudery in handling the sexual liberty project initiated by Praxagora in *The Women in Parliament*; whatever sexual liberty there is here is exclusive to men. With the exception of Poussi, who provides the line of romantic interest in the play and is safely married off at the end, all the female characters are lawfully wedded and devoted to their husbands. The husbands in question consist of an impotent, doddering old man who entertains his young and luscious wife with pornographic video tapes, a vain, obtuse and ferocious slave-driver with an inflated ego, and a rotund, balloon-like, confirmed polygamist with four wives. The vulgar squabbles of those four wives over the attention of their man were a poor and sad replacement for the hilarious and delightfully salacious tug-of-war between the two courtesans over the Athenian youth Chromes in Aristophanes' play.

For a romantic hero the author presented us with a thief, who was a fool, a knave, and a bad singer to boot. Worse still, the part was so shabbily written that poor film star Mamdouh Abdel-Alim, once landed with this disaster, didn't know what to make of it. He seemed to have decided to bluster his way through regardless, and the more insipid his lines and scenes grew, the more frenziedly he moved and shouted. By the end of the play he had no voice left. Not that it mattered; he had nothing worthwhile to say.

To pad out his hollow text, Ma'ati introduced a female impersonation scene lifted out of *The Women at the Festival*, a male impersonation scene (with Poussi and her women disciples heavily mustachioed and adequately turbaned) lifted out of *The Women in Parliament*, a kidnapping episode in which one of the wives is carried off by her husband to 'tough' upper Egypt (to Minya or Assyut) and paraded in a cage, a rescue operation undertaken by the women, and a sequence of media warfare between two rival TV channels, one manned by Mamdouh Abdel-Alim and representing the supposedly conservative and patriarchal ethos of Upper Egypt, the other womanned by Poussi and the fairer sex and broadcasting from the capital. Only a person with an atrophied brain could resort to, or accept, such offensively simplistic parody.

The TV battle allowed plenty of room for parody and for rapid costume change. But despite the extensive physical exposure of the actresses and their skimpy, flimsy, out-landish getups, the sequence, with its cacophonous musical din, dragged on drearily and seemed to last forever. By the time the performance slouched to its end, and the women filed behind their husbands, clucking happily, while Poussi flew into the arms of her former rival, it was abundantly clear that neither Mr Ma'ati, nor director Isam El-Sayed, let alone the cast, had paused for a moment to ponder the artistic integrity of what they were doing or to honestly consider the human rights of the poor spectators. By that time, however, I was too tired to care and had no energy left for indignation.

Music of Deadly Passions:

A Greek Production of Sophocles's *Electra* at the Opera House*

My first acquaintance with Greek tragedy – more years ago than I care to mention – left me tingling with horror and excitement: nothing in all the detective fiction or murder stories I had been devouring till then could match its spine-chilling, gory violence. Of "bloody deeds", including infanticide, patricide, matricide and fratricide, there was enough to leave the imagination reeling, not to mention the lustful passions, the incestuous and adulterous liaisons and the many skeletons in (and out of) the cupboard. The story of the house of Atreus, in particular, I found morbidly fascinating: there was a family whose members, over many generations, seemed to take a positive delight in taking the hatchet to each other in the name of justice, heroism, retribution, the will of the gods, or what will you. The gods, themselves, in those days, struck me as an unconscionable brood of vindictive thugs, ruthless rapists and lunatic cut-throats.

Over the years, I arrived at a better understanding of the ontological implications and cultural ramifications of the mythical groundwork of those immortal works; and yet, a residue of that original experience, a trace of that thrilling first encounter still remains with me. My instinctive sympathy with the adulterous, husband-murdering Clytemnestra, for instance, has endured, surviving many persuasive learned arguments and vigorous scholarly assaults, as well as

* 19.9.1996. In Greek.

Aeschylus's unmitigated condemnation of the character in the first two plays – *Agamemnon* and *The Libation Bearers* (or *Cheophori*) – of the extant *Oresteia* trilogy (or tetralogy if we count the lost satyr play), and Sophocles's unqualified celebration of her murder in his *Electra*. Against such male prejudice, many a reasonable woman would argue that if a mother were to bring her daughter to a city to be married only to find her slaughtered before her own eyes by the father of the child and for no better reason than to recapture an adulterous fugitive sister-in-law and punish her seducer, she would be thoroughly justified in wreaking her wrathful vengeance on the murderer. That the gods irrevocably condemn her, while acquitting her son Orestes of the guilt of murdering her on the ridiculous grounds (proffered by Apollo) "that the mother is no kin to the son since she merely receives the seed from the father and nurtures it until birth", many feminists would tell you, goes only to prove that those gods, including the female Athena (who "herself is sprung from Zeus alone"), were no more than figments of a delirious male imagination hysterically intent on supplying the socio- economic patriarchal structure with supernatural props.

Two years ago, in Paris, I was fortunate enough to stumble on a clear and thorough vindication of my feeling about Clytemnestra. *At Le Theatre du Soleil*, Arian Mnouchkine presented the Aeschylian *Trilogy*, prefacing it with Euripedes's *Iphigenia In Aulis*, and billing her new tetralogy *Les Atrides* or The House of Atreus. In this project she was not simply conducting an experiment in accommodating the classical masterpieces of the West to the elaborate and stylised theatrical conventions of the East, nor was she simply displaying her stunning imaginative powers or the vocal and physical virtuosity of her multinational cast. Above all, she was spelling out in a new, variegated

and colourful concrete alphabet, eclectically culled from many Eastern cultures, an original feminist, deconstructive reading of the old patriarchal mythologies.

In the alien Eastern visual context of *Les Atrides* (a name that carries the stench of cannibalism, reminding us of the famous banquet where Agamemnon's father, Atreus, feasted his brother. Thyestes on the flesh of three of his children), Electra was no longer the traditional mouthpiece for divine justice, nor was she the deranged and sexually-frustrated suburban spinster I had always imagined her, nor yet a Freudian father-loving, mother-hating type as O'Neil had pictured her in *Mourning Becomes Electra*, yet another trilogy. Since the character was played by the same actress who had earlier doubled in the two preceding plays as Iphigenia and Cassandra, she immediately became, on the visual level, subsumed under the (by then) established category of the oppressed young female victim who is robbed of authenic consciousness, stuffed with male delusions, and reduced to being either a physical appendage to the male – a war trophy to bear witness to his virility and military prowess (Cassandra), a sacrificial scapegoat at the altar of patriarchal authority (Iphigenia), or a mechanical, vociferous propounder of the dominant male ideology (Electra), ranting and raving in the name of some crazed, inscrutable passion because she can't have her mother hacked to pieces.

The subversion of female identity and worldview as portrayed in *Les Atrides* and the frustration of female sexuality find their focus in the unfortunate Electra who, at the end of her vengeful mission in the third part, *The Cheophori*, becomes panic-stricken at realising the unbelievable heaviness of corpses; her frenzied attempts to drag the

corpses of Clytemnestra and her lover Aegisthus off stage vividly echo, in terms of movement, Lady Macbeth's anguished cry: "Yet who would have thought the old man to have had so much blood in him?" That the bodies her brother had proudly displayed before her refuse to budge recalls the popular Egyptian belief (shared by many other Eastern peoples) that when a coffin proves unbearably heavy, it is a sign that the dead person either died unjustly or prematurely.

Though Mnouchkine's corpses were only life-like wax figures, the sight of Aegisthus's pale and naked body, slumped over the gashed and bleeding breasts of Clytemnestra, summed up his tragedy more eloquently than any other performance had done before or has since. Usually presented as a pale shadow of Clytemnestra, he was here, for once, concretely present in all his pathetic nakedness. Poor Aegisthus, born out of an incestuous union forced by his father, Thyestes, upon his daughter, the priestress Pelopia, he is doomed to be the gods' vengeful arm against the house of his uncle Atreus (after the infamous, cannibalistic feasts); but when he fulfills his task by assisting in the murder of Atreus's son, Agamemnon, he is immediately rewarded with Orestes's daggers. Talk of divine justice!!

With such recollections, and in this frame of mind, I went to the Opera House last week to watch the Amphi-Theatre's new Greek production of Sophocles's *Electra*. There I found no new interpretations, no teasingly controversial issues raised, nothing to engage the intellect or tug at the heart's strings. What I found instead, however, was an ascetic, aesthetic type of theatrical experience which functioned purely on the formalistic level. Bathing his frugal set in a kind of lighting that invested his few colours, including the dominant

black, with a dusty look and feel, director Spyros A. Evangeiiatos used the bodies of his actors and seven-women chorus to structure the empty space, producing a series of hauntingly beautiful configurations. The sculptured look and character of the performance and the hypnotic stillness of the chorus for the most part made the few out-bursts of flurried movement extremely effective. On the auditory level, the performance had a distinct musical quality, mostly vocal; indeed, the great Leda Tassopouiou (as Electra) chanted rather than spoke her lines, creating a complex rhythmical pattern of swells and ebbs, low rumblings and loud crashes; the rest of the cast supplied well-orchestrated variations on this basic tonal web and Nikos Kipourgos's instrumental music was solely used to frame the emotional pitches or to underline a change of mood. Yet in all this, a sense of emotional detachment persisted despite the undeniable theatrical impact of the performance and its many unforgettable moments.

Medea in Drag:

Yukio Ninagawa's Kabuki Medea at the Opera House*

Until last week, and despite what all the theatre history books say, Cleopatra performed by a male had always seemed to me a prepostrous proposition – one that required a fantastic leap of the imagination. I had felt sure that whatever boy actor undertook the part in Shakespeare's day must have mangled it, producing a pitiful travesty of the Egyptian queen. I had also resented the idea of males usurping the voices and identities of women and ousting them from the public performance arena in the name of theatrical conventions. As a reasonable human being and mild feminist, the exclusion of women from the theatre in whatever age or country, in ancient Greece, Elizabethan England or 17th century Japan (female performances were banned by the authorities in 1629), seemed to me not only outrageously unfair and deeply offensive, but also contrary to the spirit of theatre itself as carnival and a festive communal event.

On the few occasions I had the chance to watch a Kabuki performance, a form of theatre exclusive to male actors, such feelings had always coloured my reception. I still remember my vicious delight at the audience's baffled reaction to the classical Kabuki play presented at the official opening of the Opera House nearly eight years ago. It was a solemn occasion, attended by the president and his wife plus an exclusive audience. Nevertheless, after fifteen minutes of stunned

* 4.7.1996. In Japanese.

silence, and despite the gorgeous, elaborate costumes and scenery, many were fighting desperately to keep a straight face while others sought relief in giggles and sniggers. The following morning, a cartoon by Mustafa Hussein in the daily *Al-Akhbar* showed a woman in a state of nervous collapse with her mother supporting her and explaining that her husband had jumped at her from under the stairs, doing a 'Kabuki act.' This signalled a flood of jokes about Kabuki.

On that occasion it was obvious that the Egyptian audience could not connect in any meaningful way, aesthetic or otherwise, with the spectacle on offer. With no previous experience of this art form and very little knowledge as to what to expect, they had found the movements and gestures far too exaggerated and rigidly stylized and the vocal delivery of the performers almost outlandish.

Last Saturday, however, at the Ninagawa Company's production of Euripides's *Medea*, it was a different story. At the same place, in the big hall of the Opera House where the earlier Kabuki performance had taken place, director Yukio Ninagawa showed us what a talented, imaginative artist could do with old forms and conventions. Many of the basic features of classical Kabuki were there: the carefully regulated and choreographed movements (known as *kata* or forms); the poses (*mie*) which accentuate the climactic moments of the action, the use of the traditional three-stringed musical instrument called *shamisen*, of wooden clappers to orchestrate the performance and highlight the climaxes and, above all, the use of *onnagata*, or male actors in female roles. But while preserving them, Ninagawa, like a real master, managed to break through with his own innovations.

What he achieved in his version of Euripides's *Medea* (a very shrewd and happy choice of text) was not simply a perfect fusion of 'Japanese traditional sylization and western modern realism' or a bridging of the past and the present, as has been said, but also what one can only describe, in terms of its impact, as a kind of mystical union of maleness and femaleness in the figure of the great Tokusaburo Arashi as Medea. From an obvious symbol of femaleness – traditionally conceived and visually rendered in terms of dress, gesture, movement and mask – we watched him transform himself, wizard-like, into a warm, vibrant human presence that transcends sexual difference and bodies forth in vivid details the warring passions of all humanity. In this respect, not only the acting – the intricate voice manipulation, the deeply compelling full-body techniques and the carefully injected doses of psychological realism – but also Jusaburo Tsujimura's costumes played a crucial role. They were naturally, as one expects all costumes in Noh and Kabuki performances, rich and sumptuous in colour and material, delicately embroidered and exquisitely designed. According to the notes on the production printed in the pamphlet, Tsujimura adapted traditional Japanese costume to a modern primitivist style, using a variety of Kimono materials, and the capes were handmade from 50 pieces of embroidered antique silk *Obi* or sashes. But apart from their great beauty which delighted the eye, the costumes, in harmony with the movement, were used in the case of the chorus to structure the performance space and build sequences of powerful, evocative stage images. In the case of Medea they had the added dramatic function of underscoring her growing despair and loneliness, and her final rejection

of the traditional stereotypes of the submissive female, the obedient wife, and the tender, self-sacrificing mother. Arashi appears first richly decked out in full feminine regalia. As the play progresses he begins to strip, taking off the heavily bejewelled hat first, then the wide, colourful cloak, and finally the intricately embroidered outer garment. He is left with a very simple, close-fitting, long dress, the colour of blood and matching skull-fitting bonnet. At this moment, the whole body, freed from the constricting traditional trappings of femininity, becomes a stunningly eloquent medium of expression, shedding its earlier stylized patterns of movement and gesture, and growing freer and more passionate.

Curiously, it was the sight of this thin, gaunt, male body, tensed up in rage, pitifully contorted in agony or dashing around blindly, like a wild, caged bird, that brought home to me, for the first time in performance, the full weight of Medea's tragedy as woman and human being. It reminded me that great acting, whatever the sex of the performer, could transcend all limitations, including those of sexual identity. I walked away from the show thinking that given a director of Ninagawa's imaginative power and an actor of Arashi's emotional range and technical versatility, Cleopatra played by a male was not after all such a ludicrous idea. But then, why not a female Antony, or Lear, or Hamlet?

Up the Garden Path:
Euripides' The *Bacchae* at the AUC*

Euripides is so rarely performed in Egypt that a production of any of his plays is, unconditionally, a rare treat. You can, therefore, imagine my excitement at the prospect of watching an open-air production of his *Bacchae* with the added bonus of a woman in the director's seat and a production crew consisting mainly of women. Hopes ran high and expectations soared to unrealistic and, perhaps, untenable peaks.

The choice of site was truly inspired. Instead of The Wallace, the traditional venue for most AUC productions, director Krista Scott and set-designer Julia Coash chose the fountain area on the main campus — a charming patio bordered with majestic trees, with a small fountain in the middle, and a flight of broad, white steps on one side, leading up to an elegant building with lattice windows in the traditional Islamic style. It was a mild autumn evening with just enough wind to ruffle the leaves every now and then and send the odd one fluttering down, make the candle flames flicker and send ripples through the diaphanous robes of the female chorus. The lighting enhanced the beauty and magic of the place and the background music of traditional reed pipes and flutes which provided a kind of overture to the performance was an ingenious touch; it reminded one of the austere mountains, rugged hills, and sombre landscapes of Upper Egypt. The clay water-jugs, placed around the fountain, glistened with the water that trickled down on them and

* 14.11.1996. In English.

gave a rural feel. The audience sat in wicker chairs arranged in a half circle on the grass, round the paved performance space, and I felt I could sit there in perfect happiness for hours, even if no performance materialized. Coash had created not just a set, but an intensely evocative and highly poetic environment.

When the lights dimmed and Dionysus made his appearance in a thick cloud of smoke, the magic flared up to a climax then fizzled out, and the spell was broken. Heavily made-up, in a shiny golden tunic, with thick golden tresses, carrying the inevitable thyrsus, Dionysus (performed by Tamer Hagras) struck one as a figure out of a Xmas pantomime. Hagras delivered the prologue (in which the god outlines his plan of revenge against the house of Cadmus) in the effete manner of a cynical, decadent dandy. It was goodbye to tragedy; no genuine tragic mood could hope to exist after that. With the appearance of the chorus of oriental women (led by Nermin Amin) in their romantically seductive attire, looking more like woodland nymphs and fairies than Dionysian worshippers, and a ridiculously puny and vapid Pentheus (played by Shaun P. Bourgeois), with two clumsy, bungling guards, the pantomime mood was sealed. Tiresius and Cadmus looked like two music-hall comedians, and as the performance progressed, the vengeful god came more and more to resemble an impish, mischievous Puck. Rather than the palace of Pentheus at Thebes, the setting seemed more like the forest of Arden or the Theban woods of *A Midsummer Night's Dream.*

This made a mockery of the final scene in which Agave, Pentheus's mother, rushes in, in frenzied ecstasy, waving what she thinks is the thickly maned head of a lion, but which is, in fact, the torn-off head of

her foolish son who had disguised himself as a woman, at the instigation of Dionysus, to infiltrate the ranks of the Bacchae and watch their orgiastic revels. It was at this supposedly tragic moment that the performance came closest to the bungling attempts of Bottom and company in *A Midsummer* to stage the tragedy of ***Pyramus and Thisbe***. Saddled with the role of Agave, poor Lucy Ellenbogen did not know where to turn or what to do with the burdensome head. She delivered the ritual dirge over the bloody remains of her murdered son in neutral, embarrassed tones, as if eager to get it over with.

I half suspect that Krista Scott deliberately adopted a parodic style and modelled her production on the classical pantomime; the evidence is too great for it to be a mere coincidence. If she had meant it, it would be perfectly legitimate and quite in line with Euripides's skeptical turn of mind and his ambivalent attitude to all gods. The problem with Scott's production, however, is its inconsistency of mood; one is never quite sure how to take it and the parodic line is never quite firmly established; occasionally, the tone flirts with the tragic and earnestly serious, but as soon as you adjust to it, it swings back to comedy and burlesque. It felt as if the director was deliberately and repeatedly leading us up the garden path and pointing at once in two different directions. But disconcerting as the production was at times, and at others positively vexatious, it was never dull or unexciting. It was Euripides at his most provocative with a good measure of sophisticated wry elegance. No wonder there was so little of tragic passion.

Where Angels Fear to Tread:
Marco Baliani's *Sacrifice* at Al-Hanager*

The Old Testament never tells us how Sarah felt as she watched her husband, Abraham, lead away her only son, Isaac, one fine morning to the land of Moriah to offer him as a sacrifice to God. Did she protest, rage and plead or simply bow to the inevitable and meekly submit with the stoical fortitude of the faithful? Did she shrewdly perceive that God was only bluffing, testing Abraham's obedience but would never really take away the gift he had blessed her with after long years of barrenness and when she and her husband were well into old age? Or could it be that she saw it as just retribution for having persuaded her husband to send away his other wife, Hagar the Egyptian, and her son Ishmael so that he may not inherit any of Abraham's wealth? More likely than not, Abraham, who was already a hundred when Isaac was born, never told her to avoid any fuss, and luckily for her, the angel of the Lord arrived in the nick of time to stop the slaughter, substituting a ram for the intended victim.

No such luck for Jephthah's daughter; her father had "promised the Lord: 'If you give me victory over the Ammonites, I will burn as an offering the first person that comes out of my house to meet me when I come back from the victory. I will offer that person to you as a sacrifice.'" (*Judges 11*). Even though his daughter and only child was that person, he still fulfilled his vow, and in the case of this poor votive

* 19.10.2000. In a mixture of Italian, French, Albanian and Arabic.

human offering, no angel was at hand to save her. One wonders how Jephthah's wife felt about her daughter being burned alive as an oblation in return for military victory. But on this point, the Old Testament, again, is completely silent.

It is only in Greek tragedy, in Euripides's *Iphigenia in Aulis* which portrays a similar situation and Aeschylus's *Agamemnon* which treats its consequences, that the feelings of the mother of the ritually sacrificed victim find a place and a voice. Like Jephthah's daughter, Iphigenia is sacrificed to the gods for military reasons; to propitiate the goddess Artemis whom he had offended and who, consequently, has withheld the wind, preventing the Greek fleet from sailing to Troy, her father, Agamenon, the leader of the army, is willing to shed her blood to sail to battle. But, though, like Isaac, she is saved at the last minute by divine intervention and a dying deer replaces her on the altar while she is spirited away to Tauris, she is never reunited with her mother.

In Euripides's play, Clytemnestra is tricked into bringing her daughter to Aulis with the lure of marrying her to the warrior Achilles. When she discovers the real reason, her reaction clearly shows that she cares not two pins about either the gods or military victory. She cries and pleads, but to no avail, and when a messenger is sent to her at the end to tell her that her daughter was not slain but saved at the last minute and carried away by the gods, and what an honour that was and how she should be proud, she finds cold comfort in his report; she skeptically retorts that what he said was possibly no more than a trumped up story to lighten the burden of her grief. When Ariane Mnouchkine directed the play as part of her memorable quartet, *Les*

Atrides, at her Théâtre du Soleil in 1991, she reduced the messenger's speech to inane babbling by making Clytemnestra lie crumpled on the floor, a silent, lifeless bundle of human grief, beyond any hope of comfort and even beyond skepticism. Hers was the certainty of despair. In his film version of the play, *Iphigenia* (1976), Michael Cacoyannis had gone a step further and cut out the messenger all together. In both works we encounter a world bereft of all the old comforting myths, where the only realities are slaughter, senseless bloodshed and the ruthless patriarchal war-machine.

Marco Baliani's electrifying and startlingly topical *Sakrificë* which visited Cairo last week, playing twice at Al-Hanager, moves very much on the same lines and is informed by a similar vision. Using *Iphigenia in Aulis* as skeleton and springboard, it embarks on a daring iconoclastic trip through the ancient alleyways of human memory in search of the roots of brutality and violence, leaving in its trail a string of exploded myths. In a note in the programme, Baliani writes: "After all the massacres, the carnage, what remains on the battle field are fragments of broken young lives. It is always the fathers who send their sons to war. In the myth of Saturn, the father devours his own children fearing they will destroy him in future ... Eventually, however, it is the young themselves who accept and assert human sacrifice as an act of heroism and are prepared to sacrifice themselves for the cause without realizing the vicious, perverse mechanism which controls it. What follows is familiar: the medals, the testimonials, a few words on a tombstone for future memory, memorial rhetoric soon forgotten and faded photographs of lost young lives. But the shepherds of the nation,

the hangmen, are always very much alive and in perfect health and continue to rule exactly because and in the name of those very sacrifices." A little later on he says: "Even today, we still kill each other in the name of God or some other deity. And so, atrocities and abominable abuses are blessed and sanctified."

The play begins with a dead sea and no wind in the sails of Agamemnon's ships, and ends with a vast graveyard, extending to the horizon and no wind for the Lord's angel's wings to soar on. Both images are projected on a number of screens blocking the whole space between the stage floor and the flies. Those screens, with the images constantly flashing on them, and a small pile of stones, a piece of tree trunk and a white sheet as the only props, made up the whole set, (designed by Maurizio Agostinetto), providing the live action with a visually vivid and highly evocative background, often engaging it in silent dialogue, complementing and intensifying its significance and emotional charge or ironically undercutting it. Dense black forests, brooding trees, harsh, rocky mountains, desolate seascapes, smoky skies at sunset or dawn enveloped the stage in a miasmic aura and alternated with stunning and deeply disturbing visual metaphors which scorched themselves deep into the memory — a large profile of a woman, bleached and frozen in a silent scream, floating in midair, face down, filling the whole sky overhead like an imminent curse; a shrivelled, mummified human head, with the teeth grotesquely jutting out from the sunken cheeks in a horrible grin; pathetic, tortured human hands with the dry skin peeling off the knuckles. Though powerful in themselves, those photographic masterpieces would not have had that

tremendous impact if they had not been woven into the action as essential constitutive elements and dramatically active signifiers.

The same applies to every other element in the play: the minimalist verbal text delivered in four languages (Italian, French, Albanian and Arabic); the clean, economical, sharply defined and richly suggestive movements and gestures; the stunningly original and evocative choreography (by Michele Abbondanza and Antonella Bertoni) which draws on a variety of sources, including the worlds of birds and beasts, wrestling, street fights, hopscotch, American showbiz and rock-and-roll; the lurid sound-track, by Luigi Cinque, which combines in an almost hypnotic melange modern tunes, a variety of natural and man-made quotidian sounds (e.g., the sharpening of a knife on a flint stone), vaguely familiar old chants and Mediterranean folk tunes, the noise of modern industrial cities, and primordial cries and ululations; and last, but not least, Daniela Cernigliaro' costumes which, alternately primitive and modern, austerely simple or gorgeously elaborate and ornate, wove a delicate, subtle thread linking the past with the present.

With such a wealth of varied material and a biblical story constantly crossing and recrossing one from Greek legend, often blending with it and generating new ambivalent double signs, the play could have disintegrated and fallen into chaos. Baliani, however, is a master of design and orchestration. The material is firmly set in a clear ritualistic mode and flows along an intricate pattern of overlapping cycles; each cycle, or unit of scenes, carries traces and echoes from the previous one and replays them in new variations, expanding the story's significance and charging it with contemporary meaning.

From the quiet, low-key and familiar (except for Agamemnon's vaguely modern military coat) beginning to the startling end, the play moves smoothly, at a cunning, spiralling rhythm, carrying us up the ladder of time, through a variety of intense emotional states and feelings, conveyed in deeply stirring images, towards the present and its final devastating revelation. A series of unforgettable scenes pave the way for this revelation. These include the modern-dress ball scene where an innocent, care-free courting-dance slowing gathers menacing shadows, perceptibly grows more violent and ends up very much like a gang-rape, with the once lively body of Iphigenia thrown around like a limp rag-doll. A bridge of small stones is built by the male dancers across an imaginary pool and Iphigenia has to cross it. Once she has done that, she stands completely still and lifeless while the young men dress her up as an ancient goddess and lift her up high on their shoulders, after touching every part of her body for blessing, disappearing with her in the shadows. In the next scene, the young men are grotesquely dressed to look like the goddess they have just manufactured and perform a burlesque version of the same courting-dance, but this time without Iphigenia. When suddenly one of the screens is raised to reveal her dead body, they cannot face the reality that rather than raised to heaven, she was actually killed. They go mad and dementedly drag the body, holding it up and screaming at it to repeat the slogans that usually celebrate the death of martyrs. Iphigenia's body in this scene seemed inscribed with all the suffering of humanity throughout history, and the previous elaborate ritual of her sanctification, iconization, or, indeed, mummification, now appears as a sinister, brutal farce.

Clytemnestra's grief is equally shattering in its impact. She rushes in, in her homely, grey dress, looking distraught, then slowly bends backwards with her arms limply hanging over her head, and all of sudden, hurls her torso violently forward, like the crack of a whip, and viciously punshes her thighs, womb and breast. Then, as if unable to remain still any longer, she starts running backwards, in frenzied circles, until she finally collides with Agamemnon. For a minute, she rigidly locks him in her arms then wrenches off his military coat, tears open his trousers and pulls them down to his knees and repeatedly rushes backward and forward between this still, ludicrous, utterly quashed and mortified figure and the small pile of stones Iphigenia had stood upon earlier, dressed as a goddess, fetching stones and dropping them down his pants after spitting on them. When the load finally brings him to his knees, she leaves. He stays completely still in his ridiculous squatting position, then picks up a stone, stuffs it in his mouth and proceeds to speak. But what comes out are eerie, lugubrious sounds, as if issuing from a hollow cave, or from beyond the grave. The sounds continue even as he is carried away by his soldiers, still in his crouching position. When we see him next, he is upright, facing Iphigenia, as we first saw her, across the stage, and is surrounded by at least five tableaux vivants representing Abraham raising the knife over the prostrate Isaac. The five Isaacs plead in different tongues for the angel of the Lord to come and save them. After a momentary blackout, the angel appears in a spectacular manner. He is Agamemnon, but naked and divested of his military suit, with two gigantic wings sprouting from his shoulders and filling the whole stage. Then,

suddenly, in a stunning coup de théâtre, the wings detach themselves from his shoulders and trail back to their normal place. They were only two of the back drapes, projected over with blown-up photographs of wings. Instead of the wings, we now discover a pair of crutches. When this fallen, crippled mock-angel turns his back to us and hobbles away, we see clearly where he is heading. The back screens display a gruesome image of a desolate wilderness dotted with grave stones under a silent, bleak sky. The Lord's angel is no more than a repentant ex-general and a cripple. Anxious to atone, he tries at the last minute to take on the role of the absent angel, but, tragically, it is too late; the world has become one big cemetery. We leave Agamemnon, the symbol of the war-machine, the engineer and sole survivor of the universal holocaust, gazing at the ruins of the world.

Feud for Thought:

Electra in Egyptian mirrors at Al-Salam*

Of all the vengeful heroines of ancient Greek drama, Electra, in whatever version, be it Aeschylus's *The Cheophori* or the two plays by Sophocles and Euripides that carry her name, has always struck me as the creepiest and most disturbing. That she should fear and shun her husband-murdering mother, Clytemnestra, feel shock and horror at her bloody deed is perfectly natural; what is sinister and deeply shocking is how those feelings fester into a feverish, deadly grudge, swelling over the years into an obsessive, all-consuming passion, fanatically blazoned to the world with virulent religious zeal as a craving for justice and divine retribution.

Unlike Medea, Phaedra, Hecuba or even her own mother on whose murder she is so single-mindedly bent, Electra is young, inexperienced and completely guiltless and therefore as hard and ruthless as only innocent youth can be. Frustrated and sexually repressed, "with no man by her side," as she says in Sophocles's play, no children, or other source of fulfillment, and tantalizingly taunted with the spectacle of her mother playing the queen, living in pomp and enjoying a lover (while she lives like "an alien slave, a menial/Drudge .../Dressed like a slattern .../And for my sustenance / A beggar's dole"), she channels all her libido, jealousy and impotent rage into the lust for revenge. For her, the ghost of her father, Agamemnon, and the absent figure of her brother,

* 1.11.2001. In Arabic.

Orestes, become surrogate, if ethereal, lovers onto whom she projects all her urgent needs and thwarted desires. This may seem a bit uncharitable, but the scene in which she stands behind the door while her brother slaughters their mother inside, screaming frenziedly: "Strike her again, strike!" is guaranteed to send a shiver down the sturdiest spine.

I would have liked her better if she had betrayed a glimmer of understanding, compassion, or even pity, however faint or fleeting – a moment's doubt, hesitation, grief or regret, or shown herself as something more than a self-involved lump of hatred and pure venom. I could have at least respected her had she been less of a coward and a weakling; rather than take up arms against a sea of troubles and by opposing end them, as her peer, the nobler Antigone, does, she refrains from incurring the wrath of the gods by sullying her pretty little hands with blood and prefers to wait for her much younger brother to do the dirty deed for her. Not for a moment does she stop to consider the dreadful fate that awaits him or his terrible punishment.

More than any other heroine in Greek tragedy, she seems to epitomize the Greek patriarchal ideal of womanhood enshrined in the goddess Athena – a sexless female, not born of a mother and eternally incapable of mothering anybody. Indeed, she is the perfect embodiment of Apollo's misogynist claim at the end of *The Eumenides*, the third part of the *Oresteia*, when he says, in the course of defending matricide: "The mother is not the true parent of the child/Which is called hers. She is a nurse who tends the growth/Of young seed planted by its true parent, the male./So, if Fate spares the child, she keeps it, as one might

keep for some friend a growing plant./And of this truth, that father without mother may beget, we have/Present, as proof, the daughter of Olympian Zeus:/One never nursed in the dark cradle of the womb."

It was not until the advent of feminism in the latter half of the 20th Century that Clytemnestra started getting some sympathy and understanding or that Electra began to be seen as a thoroughly brain-washed victim of patriarchy. But, to my knowledge, no artist has undertaken a more radical rereading of the Greek plays dealing with the legend of The House of Atreus, questioning their implicit values and assumptions and exposing their insidious gender-bias than French director Ariane Mnouchkine. In her quartet of plays, *Les Atrides*, which I saw in Paris in 1992, she prefaced her production of Aeschylus's *The Oresteian Trilogy* with Euripides's *Iphigenia in Aulis* – a moving and sympathetic account of Clytemnestra's agony and helplessness as she watches her daughter, Iphigenia, slaughtered by her father as a sacrifice to the gods in the interest of a military campaign. Deeply skeptical about war, religion, the male sense of honour and concepts of duty and heroism, the play undermined in advance the traditional reading of the trilogy, providing a new, ironical and deeply unsettling perspective. When Electra eventually appeared, in the third part of the quartet, she was more pathetic than repulsive – as much a dehumanized victim of the male war machine as her sister Iphigenia.

The more recent *Electra* which I saw in Cairo during the last CIFET (the Cairo International Festival for Experimental Theatre), in a Spanish production, seemed to have gone completely over the edge and become absolutely demented. Raving and ranting, with lots of intricate,

vigorous body contortions – Indian-style – and despite an original, gorgeous set, an impressive display of fire (which threatened to burn down the National), she was thoroughly tedious. Would *Electra's Mirrors* by Metwalli Hamed prove any better? I wondered as I dragged myself to the small hall (Yusef Idris) at al-Salam theatre last week.

Outside the hall was a big brass urn with burning incense. Four young women in long gray dresses, with loose hair and white-painted faces, appeared and started circling round it, intoning a ritualistic chant, like some pagan mourners or witches conjuring up the spirits of the dead. This done, they filed into the small, rectangular darkened hall with the audience stumbling in their wake. Luckily, we were guided to our seats by some invisible forces and sat pressed against the wall, on both sides of the cramped performance space which consisted of a tiny circle at one end, connected to a narrow passage flanked by candles and leading to the outside door. To my consternation, I discovered that instead of one Electra, I was going to have to put up with four. The young author had decided to split the character among four actresses, each displaying a facet. Not a bad idea if he intended to psychoanalyse her, reveal her murky depths and air her complexes.

The initial dialogue and choral exchanges seemed to be leading that way indeed; but just as I was beginning to become engrossed and enjoy the daring talk of sexual needs, repression, and the furtive, exciting hints at incestuous love, I was suddenly and rudely jolted onto a completely unexpected political plane. I was of course prepared for the appearance of Orestes, but certainly not in such a getup. He pranced in, fresh from the USA, sporting a flamboyant bright-green satin shirt, a

cowboy hat, and armed with a spectacular array of remote-controlled toys. From then on, I found myself completely at sea, failing miserably to detect any connection between the Electras' sexual longings, their talk of revenge, forgiveness, old feuds, sacred missions and betrayals and the brother's starry-eyed fascination with the West, its progress and technology. Things got more convoluted when another Orestes suddenly materialized, dressed as a Greco-Roman warrior and waving a spear. It would take a pretty big stretch of the imagination, but one could construe this to imply an East-West, past-present confrontation. When finally the modern Orestes is forced by his ancient doppelganger to kill his mother, the murder is performed symbolically, but, funnily enough, with pronounced sexual overtones: a slab of wood is removed, revealing a round hole in the ground and all the Electras and Oresteses start stabbing into it hard with spears and screaming in ecstasy. To cap it all and create the ultimate confusion, one Electra steps back from the hole in horror, crying out that now the waiting is over, there will be no more Electras. All things considered, not a bad thing.

Though I am usually inclined to make allowances when it comes to first attempts by young writers, I must admit that this multiple Electra has stretched my tolerance to breaking point. I am told by director Hanaa Abdel Fattah that the text was originally much longer, far more muddled, and had to be extensively pruned. I wish he had been more thorough. Nevertheless, he did a good job as director, using expressive choreography, a decent cast (led by Azza El-Huseini), a minimalist set and simple costumes (by Fadi Fouquet), and impressionistic music and sound effects (by Intisar Abdel Fattah) to help us wade through this verbal morass.

Within only a couple of days I found myself bogged down at El-Tali'a theatre, in another revenge tragedy, but this time of Arab provenance. Shawqi Abdul Hakim's *Harb El-Basous (The Basous Wars)* is his latest addition to a rich dramatic output which started in the 1960s and includes twenty-three plays, most of which draw on local tradition and folklore. Basous, whose name features in the title (played by Iman Salem), is another vengeful princess, but more cunning and destructive than Electra. According to the popular Arab epic, *Sirat Al-Zir Salem*, on which the play is based, she disguises herself as an old fortune-teller after the murder of her brother, the king of Yemen (Mohyi El-Din Abdel Mohsen), at the hands Koleib (Hamdi El Wazir), the son and rightful heir of another king whom he conquered and enslaved, and slyly worms her way into the confidence of the new king's cousin and his rival (Abdel Naser Rabei), sets him against him, fueling his jealousy and ambition and sparking off a vicious war between them which lasts for forty-one years, decimating both their tribes. Equally vindictive and more Electra-like is princess Yamama, Koleib's daughter (Amani El-Bahtiti), who militantly rejects all offers of peace and compensation, demanding the impossible: her father back, alive, and nothing less. Caught in the feud is her mother, queen Galila, the widow of Koleib and sister of his murderer (Mona Hussein), and the way her daughter treats her when she comes to plead for peace and a cessation of the bloodshed on both sides, accusing her of betraying her father's memory, faintly echoes Electra's attitude to her mother.

The Basous Wars, however, does not come across as a violent, gory tragedy, but rather as an amusing didactic tale, sketchy, simplistic,

with an obvious political message. It unfolds as a series of quick scenes, interspersed with the satirical quips and comments of a modern one-man chorus (comedian Sami Maghawri) and framed with live narration from the original epic by *Sira*-singer, Aref El-Qinawi, accompanied by a live traditional band led by Ahmed Khalaf on the lute. The moral of the play, that Arab rulers should bury their conflicts and petty rivalries and unite, has been preached from the Egyptian stage for over four decades; but last week, all it provoked was cynical laughter and sarcasm. Despite the relaxed atmosphere, the gaily coloured tent-cloth draped around the theatre, making it look like a marquee, the spacious wooden *baladi* benches which replaced the usual seats, the message that touched a chord in the audience and rang true was that of revenge.

Manifold Oedipus:
Sophocles's Oedipus Rex at the National*

The earliest record of a production of Sophocles's ***Oedipus Rex*** in Arabic dates back to 1912, when George Abyad (1880-1969), the greatest classical tragedian in the history of Egyptian theatre and as much a monolithic figure as the legendary Yusef Wahbi, presented it with his newly-founded company at the old (now defunct) Cairo Opera house in Ataba square. It was a bold, unprecedented step, and not just on account of the play's dodgy plot which combines patricide with an incestuous marriage involving mother and son. The classics of the Euruopean theatre, whenever staged, which wasn't often, were either presented in hacked and patched, or thinly diluted musical versions – like Sheikh Salama Higazi's *Martyrs of Love*, a musical adaptation of *Romeo and Juliet* (first staged in Alexandria in March 1888, according to a notice in *Al-Ahram*), or performed in their original language by visiting companies from Europe, or amateur dramatic societies, made up of members of the foreign community in Egypt and Egyptians with a foreign education.

Abyad himself had been active in such groups since he arrived in Alexandria in 1898 as a Lebanese émigré to join his uncle and work as station-master for Sidi Gaber Railway station. Indeed, it was while acting with a French amateur group in 1904 that Khedive Abbas spotted his talent and sent him, at his own expense, to study acting in France. Abyad's five years at the Paris Conservatoire, plus one year on the

* 6.12.2001. In Arabic.

road, touring the provinces with his teacher, Silvan, and his company, moulded his taste and acting style for life. For two years after his return to Egypt, in 1910, he acted exclusively in French, forming a company for that purpose and taking the lead in such famous classics of the French stage as *Louis XI*, Racine's *Andromache*, and Moliere's *Tartuffe*, among others.

After two successful seasons, however, Abyad, who was equally proficient in Arabic, was instructed by the minister of Education then to use his knowledge and experience to improve the state of the Egyptian theatre by joining the theatrical mainstream, seeking a wider audience, and offering them the great European classics in Arabic. The French company was disbanded, and with generous financial help from a wealthy benefactor and theatre-lover, by the name of Abdel Raziq 'Inayet, Abyad formed another in his name; it opened its first season at the Opera on 19 March, 1912 with a production of a verse drama by the famous Hafez Ibrahim, 'the poet of the Nile' (as he was nicknamed), called *The Wounded Lover of Beirut*. *Oedipus Rex* and *Othello*, followed and, in subsequent years, Shakespeare's *Macbeth, King Lear, Julius Caesar, The Merchant of Venice*, and *The Taming of the Shrew* were added to the repertoire, as well as Ibsen's *Enemy of the People* and a dozen French classics, including Moliere's *Don Juan, Les Femmes Savantes, Tartuffe* and *L'Ecole des Femmes*.

The company survived for twenty years, despite frequent lack of funds, the avid popular taste for vaudevilles, farces, musicals and violent social melodramas (invariably performed in the accessible colloquial rather than the forbidding classical Arabic), and notwithstanding the fierce competition offered by Yusef Wahbi and

Fatma Rushdi who followed Abyad's example and helped themselves liberally to the classics (with Wahbi at one time playing Iago to Abyad's Othello when the latter, in deep financial straits, joined the former's Ramses troupe for a brief spell in 1923.) It was a hard but rewarding struggle which continued, with a few brief interruptions, until 1932; and throughout, *Oedipus Rex* remained a regular and frequent item in the company's repertoire, with Abyad always the eponymous hero and Dawalat Qasabgi (who joined the company in 1918 and married him in 1923, becoming Dawlat Abyad) as Jocasta. So enamoured of the play the couple seemed that when they joined the Egyptian National Theatre Company, founded by the government in 1935 (when almost all the private companies had gone bankrupt and closed down), they took it along with them, together with a few other favourites.

Unfortunately, given the notoriously inaccurate available records of the Egyptian theatre, not to mention their many gaps and lapses of memory, one cannot find out when the last performance of *Oedipus Rex* by the Abyads took place. One may be sure at least that it wasn't after 1944, when the couple left the National company – the wife to pursue her career in cinema, where she was much in demand, and the husband to become professor of acting and elocution at the newly-founded Acting (later, Theatre) Institute. And although we know that Mrs. Abyad rejoined the company briefly, first, in 1948, then in 1952 (the year it was rechristened The Egyptian Company for Acting and Music and George Abyad was appointed its general manager), it is extremely unlikely they attempted Sophocles's masterpiece another time. For one thing, they were too old; for another, Abyad's health was failing and he resigned his post as company manager in July, 1953, within less than a year of his appointment.

For the rest of the 20th Century, and however hard we look, we find no mention, not even a hint of another production of *Oedipus Rex*. It was not until last month that it suddenly burst upon us, in its full textual splendour, at the National – albeit in the least expected and most ill-suited space: the (Abdel Rehim El-Zurqani) small hall upstairs. The performance I saw was modest and frugal in the extreme, with deplorable costumes (particularly in Jocasta's case), an unknown director (Mamdouh 'Aql), and half-known actors, not to mention the cramped space and the bulky Greek-façade-set which ate up most of the performance area, forcing the principal actors to stay too close to the audience most of the time, literally breathing and spattering in their faces, and leaving practically no room for the chorus, with the result that they constantly bumped into the audience on their way in and out of the single door in the hall (the only access to it for actors, audience and technicians), and not infrequently obstructed our view of the stage. Nevertheless, and despite these and other similarly egregious faults, the current production at the National works and is exciting and strangely moving.

After ten or fifteen minutes, I stopped noticing the many errant threads trailing from the uneven hems of the sloppily sewn gowns of the chorus, their cheap, ill-fitting, shaggy wigs, Jocasta's absurd, unflattering getup, the low arched entrance to the palace which wore a pathetic, squashed look and barely allowed Oedipus to go through it straight without banging his head against it; I even forgot the irritating smells and perfumes of my neighbours and the oppressive spatial constriction. It was as if something had slowly sneaked upon me unawares and suddenly gripped me; before I knew it, I was swept along by the chilling, pitiful drama unfolding before me.

Though thoroughly familiar with the text. I thrilled with fear and suspense as I watched poor, doomed Oedipus (Hamada Ibrahim) eagerly playing detective and fervently investigating the murder of the previous king of Thebes, whose throne and conjugal bed he now occupied, not knowing that he himself was the murderer he was seeking and that, unwittingly, he had already fulfilled the curse put on him at birth (that he would kill his father, marry his mother and get children by her) – the curse he strove desperately to elude and thought he had succeeded. The cruel irony became unbearable, almost sickening, as Jocasta (Amal El-Zoheiri) – who equally thought she had outwitted the prophecy of the vengeful Delphi oracle when she allowed her new-born son be taken away and left to die at the top of a mountain – began to sense the first intimations of the approaching horror and tried frantically to fend off the final appalling revelation. I was seized by a mixture of intense pity and anxiety which kept mounting until it became physically painful. I knew the dialogue almost line by line, and yet, I found myself foolishly hoping something would happen to stop the tragic discovery. The pity of it, I kept repeating and suddenly I understood, not mentally, but with my whole being, what Aristotle (with whom I don't often agree) had meant when he spoke of tragedy arousing fear and pity. I also thought that he was perhaps right when he cited this play in his *Poetics* as an ideal model for tragedy.

Except for the acting, which was simple, unaffected, low key and deeply candid, I do not think any other production of *Oedipus Rex* could have looked less promising or had as many fateful drawbacks. And yet, It worked for me, and for all the other people who filled the hall the night I saw it. And judging by the size of the audience who flock to see it every night since, making it the most successful

production at the National Upstairs this year, my own experience of it was not just a question of me being in a particularly susceptible mood that night, or that night's performance being a one-time fluke. And what does this prove? If anything, that given a modicum of decent acting, a really good text can make up for almost any lack and take everything in its tride.

But this leaves us with something of a riddle: why was such a powerful, well-tested play neglected by directors and theatre companies in Egypt for over half a century? The puzzle becomes more teasing when you know that the text is widely known among educated Egyptians and features regularly (in the original Greek or in translation, and usually hand in hand with the *Poetics*) on the curricula of almost all Arabic and European languages departments in Egyptian universities. Furthermore, of the many the European adaptations of the myth (twenty-nine were produced between 1614 and 1939), the most famous – namely, Seneca's, Corneille's, Voltaire's, John Dryden's, Jean Cocteau's (*The Infernal Machine*) and Andre Gide's – are either available in Arabic or taught in their original languages in universities. It wouldn't do to argue that Sophocles's text would be too shocking in performance and trot out its web of taboo relationships as an explanation. Between 1949 and 1970, four local variations appeared – all by prestigious, morally upright and highly respected authors – and two of them found their way to the stage.

In 1949, Tawfiq El-Hakim and Ali Ahmed Bakathir published their versions; in 1968, Fawzi Fahmi wrote *The Return of the Absent* (performed at the National in 1977, with Mahmoud Yasin in the title role and Ayda Abdel-Aziz as Jocasta), and two years later, Galal

El-Sharqawi directed Ali Salem's hilarious political satire in the vernacular, *You Who Killed the Beast*, for (the now defunct) El-Hakim theatre. Read together, the four plays reveal common features. All view the myth from a political perspective (as their authors openly admit in their introductions to the published texts), waving aside the central conflict between Oedipus and the gods and centering the plot on a power- struggle, riddled with conspiracies. In all of them, Oedipus invariably appears as a good, benevolent king, misled, corrupted, or led astray by priests and courtiers, while Tiresias (or Luskias in Bakathir's case) and Creon always play the villains. Significantly too, all were written in response to a national crisis: Fahmi's and Salem's were immediate reactions to the 1967 disastrous war in which they tried to make sense of or exorcise the terrible nightmare of the June defeat. In both, Oedipus was a thin disguise for Nasser who, in Salem's case, was blamed for shutting himself off from his people, leaving them an easy prey to his demonic clique, while in Fawzi's, his fatal mistake was hiding the truth from his people. The late critic, Ghali Shukri, has written extensively about the recurrence in the Egyptian drama of the 1960s of this representation of Nasser which, while not completely exonerating him, lays most of the blame on his coterie of trusted colleagues and assistants.

It seems, however, that this lenient, sympathetic view of the people in power, however grievous their mistakes, dates back further than the 1960s. El-Hakim's *Odeeb* is a case in point. Noting the play's political relevance in his book, *The Egyptian Theatre after World War II* (1979), Sami Munir relates it to its immediate historical context, reading it as a political metaphor of the events of 4 February, 1942, when the British troops surrounded King Farouk's palace and forced him to appoint a

Wafdi government, with El-Nahhas Pasha at its head. Similarly, according to Munir, Tiresias (the British), in El-Hakim's play, manipulates Oedipus, the rightful heir to the throne (the Wafd party), for his own ends, bringing him to power by lies and a show of force. In both cases, the Wafd's and Oedipus's, it was a fatal mistake to get to power through the machinations of a sly enemy of the people, and, therefore, both inevitably lose their power and credibility and meet with a tragic end.

Bakathir's *Odeeb*, on the other hand, was written in the wake of the defeat of the Arab armies in Palestine in 1948. "At the time," he says, "I felt despair regarding the future of the Arab nation and shame, disgrace and ignominy. Our dignity had been trampled underfoot. I remained in the grip of this deep, heavy pain a long time, not knowing how to relieve it." The play, which offers an Islamic/political reading of the myth, was obviously his way of relieving it. More than anything, it reflects the intensification of the Islamic movement in the late 1940s, and was obviously influenced by Sayed Qutb's book, *Social Justice in Islam*, which sought to stem the rising tide of Marxism at that time by formulating an integrated, coherent Islamic theory of social justice. Oedipus, portrayed as a kind of popular, epic hero, is an ardent believer in social justice; unfortunately, however, he is an atheist who believes only in the power of the human intellect and will. His lack of faith blinds him to the evil intrigues of Luskias, the wily, ungodly, mammon-worshipping priest and politician, and he falls an easy prey to him. Tiresias, however, who speaks like a preacher, in a language redolent of the Koran, leads him back to God and converts him to the belief that without faith in God and total submission to his will and guidance, social justice can never be attained. By the time Bakathir's

Oedipus leaves Thebes (and the stage), he has become a devout Moslem (like his author) who believes that only through Islam can his nation triumph and find justice and prosperity.

May be any Egyptian play based on the Oedipus myth has to be perforce political. As some Arab thinkers have argued, and El-Hakim remarked in his preface to his own treatment, the Greek concept of tragedy is inherently antithetical to the Islamic view of the relationship between human beings and God. A Moslem Oedipus can only grapple with earthly issues and fight sordid politicians and mean-spirited foes. An occasional glimpse of the Greek, pagan hero, therefore, is always a refreshing, welcome treat. Pray to God our increasingly repressive times do not deprive us of it.

Antigone in Palestine:
Sophocles' *Antigone* at the AUC*

The scene facing me at the Falaki theatre was one of total devastation: the ruins of a city ravaged by war or wrecked by a violent earthquake. In the eerie blue light which enveloped the stage, you could make out, high up, near the flies, what looked like a huge crane lying on its side, precariously perched on top of the slanting wall of a gutted-out collapsed building, with other wreckage flanking it on either side. Red light flickered here and there from underneath the rubble through metal bars. Stancil Campbell's set, it seemed, had transported the Greek Thebes to the West Bank – to Jenin, Nablus and Ramallah – and it was obvious, even for those who had not had time to glance at the programme before the show, and even before the actors stormed in through the auditorium in modern dress and combat uniform, to face us silently for a brief, unsettling moment, where that production was heading and where director Frank Bradley and his crew had taken their inspiration.

You could feel the whole auditorium tensing up and edging forward in their seats as Wiam El-Tamami (a thin, pale Antigone, in jeans and black sweater) and Jasmin Sobhi (looking pathetically frail in a huge, coarse shawl as Ismene) flitted through the ruins like tormented ghosts then crouched in the shadows, breathlessly whispering, with the red glow of a dying fire, still simmering somewhere under the rubble, playing on their faces. When Kreon (Michael Guirgis) marched in, tall,

* 9.5.2002. In English.

fair and imposing, in combat gear, to deliver his edict into a microphone from a podium (as if before TV cameras), with his queen Eurydike in a prim suit (like a typical first lady) and his son, Haimon, in uniform, standing at a discreet distance behind, smiling benignly, while photos of the corpses of Eteokles and Polyneikes were ceremoniously displayed to the viewers, the old Thebes took a stunning leap forward into the present and however hard one tried, one could not shut out the image of suicide-bomber, Wafaa Idris, from one's mind.

In his director's notes, Bradley says: "When, a year ago, we chose to put *Antigone* on our season, the world seemed innocent. When, last November, we began discussing among ourselves the conceptual approach, September 11 had changed everything. Since beginning rehearsals in early March, the world has gotten uglier, more despairing. We haven't spent a lot of time talking directly about recent world events, but there is no doubt that they have worked their way into *Antigone*, perhaps on a more subconscious than conscious level. This *Antigone* is not a comment on recent events, but a reaction to them."

Subconsciously or otherwise, Bradley's Antigone, vividly cast in the immediate historical context of the Arab-Israeli conflict and the US campaign against terror, could not but evoke the dual, paradoxical image of Wafaa as martyr/terrorist. Bradley and his team were careful not to sentimentalize her, not to give a one-sided view of her action or her conflict with Kreon – though, in the final analysis, the balance of sympathy slightly tips in her favour. However much sympathy this *Antigone* provokes, one is never allowed to forget that the central conflict in the play is not a melodramatic one of good versus evil, but is, rather, one between two passionately held principles of right. While

the production touches a raw nerve in its Arab audience, unwaveringly underlining the overweening confidence of Kreon and the intolerant arrogance of military power, it never allows them to sidestep the fact of the equally destructive intolerance of the oppressed. When Antigone says to Kreon: "There is nothing that you can say / That I should wish to hear, as nothing I say / Can weigh with you," the hopelessness of the Arab/Israeli deadlock becomes the shared responsibility of both parties. The way out of this lethal deadlock suggested by the production will hardly cut any ice with either party; if anything, it will trigger accusations of treason on either side. Bradley, however, states it, for all it is worth. Explaining his own reading of Sophocles' play, he says: "His 2500 year old perspective suggests that we'd all be better off with a less rigid sense of self, one that does not consider it a sign of weakness to admit one's own limits when faced with larger forces. He tells us that we cannot sacrifice our capacity to judge, to evaluate, even in the face of ideas that shake our foundations. We must accept our enemies, our dead."

But what if 'our enemies' are still very much alive and in absolute control? What do you do with all the anger and the rage? What do you do with the bereaved women wandering through the rubble of what was once their homes? Instead of a 'chorus' of Theban male elders, Bradley, with the help of Laurance Rudic, gave us a chorus of six women (as if to counterpoint and gainsay Kreon's chauvinistic statement: "Take them, and keep them within -/ The proper place for women,") with whom every peace-loving person on either side of the Palestinian/Israeli border could identity. (Even in Sophocles' time, peace-loving was obviously identified – and despised – as a 'feminine' trait; Antigone says: "My way is to share my love, not share my hate."

To which Creon replies: "Go then, and share your love among the dead./ We'll have no woman's law here, while I live.")

In this context, one is tempted to identify with Haemon, the person in whom their tragedy and the whole situation is personified and brought to a single focus – a young man, betrothed to the woman whom he honours for her courage and piety, and son to the king whom he has respected and longs to go on respecting for his fatherhood and for his office. I, for one, remembered the Peace Now movement in Israel who watched over the check-points to help Palestinians and who braved the siege around the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem to smuggle in food and medicine, the articles of Alisa Solomon in the *Village Voice*, among other brave American Jews (who were told last year by fellow-Jews in a demonstration, "You're the ones Hitler missed"), and the level-headed speeches of Hanan Asharawi.

But Haemon dies in Sophocles's play as well as in Bradley's production; and what remains is a warning, an elegy and, in Bradley's words, an "opportunity to join in spirit those who inhabit the fallen cities of the West Bank and Gaza." With him "we appeal that the siege of their cities be lifted so that they can rebuild their lives in freedom and dignity."

Shakespeare*

* Other Egyptian productions of *King Lear, Macbeth, Hamlet, Romeo and Juliet, A Midsummer Nights' Dream* and *Titus Andronicus* are covered in two earlier books by the same author, both published by the General Egyptian Book Organisation (GEBO). See: *The Egyptian Theatre: A Diary, 1990-1992* (1993), pp. 22-26, 40-43, 45-47, 51-54 and *The Egyptian Theatre: New Directions* (2003), pp. 157-164, 173-179, 189-192, 233-240, 353-360.

'Electrophelia' and 'Lady Hambeth':
Jawad El-Assadi's *Ophelia's Window* at Al-Hanager Centre*

If you teach *Hamlet* over a number of years to a youthful body of students you are likely to end up sympathizing with T.S. Eliot's bewildered and vexed recognition of the play's "intractability"; you may be sorely tempted to take the easy way out and dismiss it, the way he did, as "an artistic failure" on account of its "superfluous and inconsistent scenes." In fact, trying to explain what this 'Mona Lisa' of literature is all about in terms of "the uses of this world", as Hamlet would say (meaning the affairs of the living or the drama of life), must be the silliest wild-goose chase anyone can embark on; curiously, however, there has never been a shortage of critics willing to chase after mirages.

Like a siren, the play continues to lure readers, critics, scholars and artists to its rocky shores and sterile promontories with the promise of untold treasures. But when they have dug through its thick layers of ambiguous language and disquieting imagery and threaded their way through its subterrenean maze of "confines, wards, and dungeons" amidst many false apparitions and deceptive appearances, they discover, to their dismay, that Shakespeare had led them a merry dance. The quest ends in the graveyard at the edge of a dark hole in the ground and the ardently sought treasure is an empty skull and a handful of dust. The only knowable reality, the play argues, is this quintessence of dust. The rest is silence.

* 17.2.1994. In Arabic.

True *Hamlet* talks to us long and voluminously about many things — politics, religion, love, sex, incest, revenge, rebellion, fratricide, matricide, guilt, thanatos, the function of art – you name it. Indeed, there is hardly a topic it does not seem to touch upon. And yet, it is ultimately about 'nothing' – in the existential sense of Sartre's 'nothingness'. Rich, vague and baffling, never quite intelligible or self-complete, the play is best understood simply as a metaphor for life — as, in the words of Macbeth, "a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing."

Is it this '*nOthing*' — this gaping void at the heart of the play — which has tempted so many artists to try to fill it? No other play since the Greeks has inspired so many productions, reworkings and adaptations — not to mention the critical interpretations and reinterpretations. In Tom Stoppard's *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* it was used to express modern man's impotence, bewildered incomprehension and marginality in today's world; in Heiner Muller's *Hamlet Machine* it was telescoped into a potent image of the traumas and schisms of a post-War world; in the Syrian Mamdouh Udwan's *Hamlet Wakes Up Late*, and the Egyptian Mahmoud Abu Duma's *Dance of the Scorprions* the political dimension latent in the Shakespearean original was developed and expanded, and Hamlet became a symbol for the impotence and frustration of Arab intellectuals.

More recently, another Arab artist, Iraqi director and playwright Jawad El-Assadi, has decided to take up the challenge of the Hamletian void and you can watch him wrestling with it at the Hanager Centre every night until the 20th of this month.

To Shakespeare's text El-Assadi brought not only his fine talents as poet and director and his imaginative bravado, but also his own personal experience of the reign of terror in Iraq and of the decimating machinery of the police-state. A fugitive from Saddam's regime, he now lives in Syria and works wherever he can — in Syria, Jordan, Spain and now Egypt. His expatriate state and its consequent feelings of guilt, desertion and unabating home-sickness consistently inform his work. In all his productions, for which he invariably writes the texts or scenarios, we meet characters in a state of limbo, caught in a no-man's land darkened by the shadows of visible or invisible tyrants and oppressors. What breaks down the limbo-dwellers in the end, however, and puts paid to all their hopes of salvation is not any clearly-defined external foe but the manacles of fear. Sadly, the most imaginative, sensitive, and reflective people are also the most prone to fear.

Like Shakespeare, Jawad argues that "conscience does make cowards of us all;" that "the native hue of resolution' can easily be 'sicklied o'er with the pale cast of thought."

The conflict between mind and brute force, between the man of thought and the man of action, the intellectual and the military dictator still engages El-Assadi's mind in his latest venture, *Ophelia's Window*. But here, as the title suggests, it is viewed and projected through female eyes, primarily those of Ophelia and the two female grave-diggers and, to a lesser extent, Gertrude's.

This female perspective gives El-Assadi's play a definite feminist thrust; this may appear as a novelty in the light of earlier productions and reworkings of *Hamlet*; but it is irrefragably no new aspect of El-Assadi's work. His feminist leanings can be easily traced in his

earlier work in his sensitive and sympathetic portrayal of female characters, and in the roles they are given as the keepers of the truth and the guardians of conscience. Not surprisingly his actresses rarely walk away from Arab festivals without one best-actress award at least: in the Carthage festival of 1991, the leading actress in his *The Massacres of Macbeth* got the award for best actress; in the fourth Cairo Experimental Theatre Festival Dala El-Rahbi won best actress for her role in his production of Sa'dallah Wannus's *Rape*, and in the fifth, last September, he won the award for best director for his *Variations on Ward No. 6* and Sabah Abu Affar won best actress for her role in the play.

In the present production, *Ophelia's Window*, Mu'tazza Salah Abdel Sabour, a theatre graduate from the American University in Cairo and the daughter of the late famous poet, promises to follow suit and become another addition to El-Assadi's line of excellent, award-winning actresses. She confesses with loving gratitude the time and effort he invested in her training for the part of Ophelia and so does Minha El-Batrawi who plays Gertrude. And, indeed, both actresses have every reason to be grateful for what he did to their original roles.

In Shakespeare's play, Ophelia and Gertrude are in a sense reflections of the same character at different stages in life. We can easily imagine Ophelia growing into another Gertrude and there is every reason to believe that the queen must have been as docile, obedient, naive and slightly secretive as Ophelia. Both are remarkably silent for the most part and when they are not overtly hectored and bullied by their men folk, they are covertly stage-managed and prompted. We never get to see them alone and hardly ever hear them express what they

think or feel. Not unexpectedly, when Ophelia strays out of the bounds of sanity, she summarily disappears; her insane freedom of speech makes her a dangerous threat to the regime — as Horatio (of all people) unintentionally forewarns the queen — and after only a couple of 'mad' scenes where she truly comes into her own for the first time in the play, we are told she drowned. What drivel! You have only to listen to Gertrude's cloyingly flowery and fanciful description of the drowning to feel certain that she is reciting something she had learnt by rote beforehand (probably penned by Claudius) and that Ophelia was bumped off as surely as the late king had poison poured "in the porches of (his) ears."

Shakespeare, however, never states the matter quite plainly. He provides some clues but leaves you to build up from the text your own argument for Ophelia's death by foul means (as I did in 1990 in my book *Spotlights of the English Stage*). Nor does he provide an unequivocal answer as to the identity of the murderer. At the end, we are left with two big question marks hanging over the death of Ophelia and the guilt of Gertrude.

Jawad El-Assadi's new play takes off from there and proceeds to answer both questions. Shakespeare's play is referred back to its original source in the *Orestian trilogy* of Aeschylus, with its murderous queen Clytemnestra, on the one hand, and is viewed in the mirror of Macbeth and his Lady on the other. This double process of textual superimposition produces a new psychologically rich and complex Gertrude (convincingly and sensitively rendered by Minha El-Batrawi) and a stirringly brave and passionate Ophelia, superbly performed by Mu'tazza Abdel Sabour.

Disappointingly, this textual interaction benefited the male characters but little. With Ophelia and Gertrude firmly in focus, Hamlet became a bit blurred while Horatio and Laertes were heavily overshadowed. Ahmed Mukhtar, however, managed to come over quite vividly as Hamlet, despite the drastic curtailment of his part, and Nasser Abdel Mon'im managed the stunted part of Laertes with competence though confined to a wheelchair and two short appearances. In the case of Polonius, it was the other way round: Jawad El-Assadi meant him as a ruthless, crafty time-server and cowardly hypocrite but the actor failed him. Claudius, on the other hand, was impressively performed; Khalid El-Sawi was every inch a ruthless military dictator, frighteningly inhuman and with an insane glint in the eyes to boot.

Of all the main characters, only Claudius survives (and possibly Polonius since his fate is left deliberately vague). This end is very much in harmony with El-Assadi's undisguised condemnation of the shillyshallying of Arab intellectuals. To further underline their paralysis, endless vacillation and vacuous indifference he dotted the space between the sliding door at the back of the stage and the graveyard area at the front with scattered rocking chairs.

Stage-designer Ashraf Na'im exploited well the structure of the Hanager theatre with its traverse stage and twin auditoriums on either side. Confining the audience to one auditorium, he transformed the other into an extension of the stage by means of a wide gangway that stretched over the seats from the stage to the back. On the side of the audience, a few feet away from the stage, he placed a wooden barrier, creating a third performance space especially for the grave-diggers.

This inspired and richly evocative stage-design provided El-Assadi with ample opportunities to indulge his wonderful knack for visual effects; the approach of the ghost on the gangway behind the semi-transparent sliding-doors, the funeral procession and the crucified Horatio in the distance, framed by the door, were particularly effective. The placing of the graveyard, too, below the stage, at the level of the audience and close to them, was an intelligent decision in terms of significance and theatrical impact.

Sitting in our temporary darkness, staring across the narrow, imaginary grave at a solitary white skull on the edge of the stage in a pool of greenish light, we could make the imaginary leap into the void, into "The undiscovered country from whose bourn / No traveller returns" and commune with the dead. We also identify with the grave-diggers (beautifully played by Hanan Yusef and Salwa Mohamed Ali) for they speak in the Egyptian dialect, like us, and pepper their racy, unaffected conversation with old proverbs and maxims. Theirs is not the wisdom of the intellectuals and politicians who are strutting and fretting their brief hour on the stage and then tumble one by one into the grave to be heard no more; theirs is the natural wisdom of the simple ordinary mortals who live close to the earth.

The intermittent intrusions of the two female grave-diggers are carefully calculated to provide us with a valuable vantage point: as we view with them the pageant of history from down below, El-Assadi's message surfaces unobtrusively: the diggers of graves are also the tillers of the land; in life and death, they are the salt of the earth and throughout history they have managed to sink and survive all dictators.

The Tempting of the Shrewd:
The Taming of the Shrew at the Opera House*

In our age of growing feminist zeal, *The Taming of the Shrew* (or 'the shaming of the true', as one quibbling critic once called it) has become something of an ugly duckling among Shakespeare's comedies. In the West, more often than not, critics have found its complacent, tongue-in-cheek chauvinism embarrassing and hard to stomach, if not down-right disgusting. But rather than sweep it under the carpet safely out of sight, some have feebly counseled that we view it in its historical context, against the background of the barbaric treatment of wives in the middle ages! This may work for scholars; they seldom *see* a play anyway. But for the ordinary theatre-goer, historical facts and contexts count for very little, and no amount of them will help them to make sense of a play or relate to it if it fails to touch a real chord in their lived experience.

It is all very well for some critics to argue, as Ann Barton does, that "by comparison with the husband who binds his erring spouse, beats her, bleeds her into a state of debility or incarcerates her inside the salted skin of a dead horse ... Petruchio – although no Romeo – is almost a model of intelligence and humanity." But if a production presumes to give a sympathetic rendering of Petruchio's conduct and Katherina's subsequent reforming (or deforming?) on no better basis than this, it might as well save itself the trouble.

* 14.4.1994. In English.

On the other hand, a complete and thorough manipulation of the play as a virulent feminist tract against the oppression of women cannot but sacrifice Katherina in the process, both as a character and as a thematic thread in a complex web of meaning. Charles Marowitz's free adaptation of the play (staged in 1975) in which Petruchio is made first to drive Katherina insane before raping her must have sent a chill down the spines of all the male chauvinist pigs present on the occasion; but how much of the play was there in it?

Thinking of the many ways directors have handled or mishandled the embarrassing *Shrew*, and musing cynically that what may prove a passionate issue in some cultures may pass almost unnoticed in others, and that in our Egyptian society very few people would dream of casting *The Shrew* as a problem play, or find anything objectionable in it, I made my way to the Opera House last week to see what Ian Talbot and the New Shakespeare players would make of it.

I was not very optimistic, I must admit. Upon hearing the news of *The Shrew*'s planned visit to Cairo, some feminist friends had exclaimed: "Do we need this on top of everything else?" And though a confirmed Bardolatress for nearly thirty years, and always glad of a British show, I couldn't help sympathizing with them. Currently, women's rights in Egypt are coming under heavy fire and the call to force women out of the public arena back into their hereditary roles and the shelter of their husband's wings is increasingly finding many a welcoming ear. It is not uncommon to hear it hollered from the pulpit of a mosque or screamed into a loudspeaker by some frenzied preacher in the course of his friday sermon. Besides, since most girls in our country are reared on female submissiveness from early infancy, until it

becomes almost a second nature, while boys are brought up to expect it as a birth right and religious privilege, do we need Katherina to come to us all the way from England, decked out in the alluring finery of art, to preach to us what the school text-books, the media and the performing arts here are never tired of bombarding us with?

Ian Talbot and his crew, however, cleverly negotiated this difficult ideological hurdle. By a lot of theatrical sleight of hand, they managed to transform *The Shrew*, if only for the duration of the performance, from a thorn in the side of the ardent feminist into a mild satire on the bourgeoisie, its mercenary drives, hypocritical attitudes and false stereotypes. And the whole process was managed cunningly, without the slightest show of force. Initially, the production seemed deceptively innocent of all ideology; it unfolded like a child's dream where images from the circus, the puppet-show and the folk-tale floated into each other and merged. It looked as if Talbot, having taken the wise decision of going along with the text rather than against it, and embracing zestfully, whole-heartedly and unashamedly its essential and all-pervading theatricality, was out for a simple frolic.

He set the play in a circus tent, dressed and moved his characters like clowns and puppets, played up the element of knockabout farce, and bolstered it with a strong dose of tumbling and juggling, a lot of skipping and prancing and a touch of hip-wiggling. He also provided a mock pantomime horse, dressed in big black and while checks and red stockings, and made him sit down crossing all four legs and coyly eyeing the audience. The effect was one of harnessing within the circus arena the world of hunting, constantly evoked by the verbal imagery of the play, to the world of polite society in Padua and sending up both.

Talbot finished up his child's drawing by splashing it, higgledy-piggledy, with all the colours he could think of. To complete the carnival atmosphere, he provided a crazy medley of sounds, orchestrating the voices of the actors from deep bass to shrill soprano, making three of them sing a portion of the dialogue to the tune of 'Here we go round the mulberry bush', and leading Guy Burgess to deliver Biondello's description of Petruchio's horse as a rap song. There was soft live music too, besides the recorded familiar circus tunes.

And what with the rough and tumble atmosphere and general boisterousness, the performance seemed to rush headlong on its merry way, sliding blithely over any ideological boulders it came across. Yet, at certain moments, the swift, untroubled flow seemed to slacken its pace, as if the wind had suddenly died down. In these brief moments, one had a nebulous feeling of a pattern forming, subtly, almost imperceptibly. By the end, however, it is all there and Talbot's social satirical perspective is unmistakable. Traces of it may be found in the original text, but Talbot makes it the focus of his production and its moving force. Moreover, he firmly projects Katherina and Petruchio as his satirical agents, as two rebellious people and social outsiders who start off as antagonists, locked in a traditional battle of the sexes, and end up transcending it and joining hands to expose the fraudulence of the social rules, roles and images which give rise to it, together with all the love-lorn swains, simpering coy damsels, submissive wives and daughters, masterful husbands and venerable patriarchs, and other such silly cliches.

But though this interpretation, with its many ramifications, informs the whole production, it is worked out purely in terms of movement and

gesture, tone and rhythm, subtle visual contrasts and correspondences, significant lighting changes, and sudden shifts in the style of acting from broad caricature to realism. In the opening scene, a bluish haze envelops the stage, suggesting the cold light of reality, and dimming the gay colours of the circus-tent at the back. The costumes are sombre, exclusively of black and white, and the acting is straightforward. In the following scene, when the deception of Sly is set in motion, the lighting brightens a little and colour is introduced in relation to disguise in the dress of the boy masquarading as Sly's wife. The acting style changes too, becoming exaggerated and stylized in tone and gesture. When the actors enter, with the promise of further disguises, the stage is suddenly drenched in light, revealing a gorgeous riot of colours; thus a firm link is visually established between light, colour, and theatrical illusion. But while black remains firmly related to reality, white becomes ambiguous. It is the colour of Sly's shirt, the hostess's apron, the collars of the Lord and his followers; but it is also the colour of the robe Sly accepts, with the illusion that he is lord of the manor, and dons throughout, and also the colour of the actors' initial clothes before they don their theatrical costumes. By the end of the Sly sequence an index of signs has been established, in terms of sights and sounds, to serve as a code between performance and spectator.

Without this code we could lose the drift of the production and miss many visual ironies and calculated signals. We would miss the funny correspondence between Bianca and the disguised page-boy (through their common shrill tone) which establishes her at the outset as a travesty of womanhood. The correspondence between the bluish lighting in the opening and the bluish lighting of Petruchio's home which greets Katherina on her arrival would be lost on us too; nor

would we understand why Katherina and Petruchio are never allowed by Cathryn Harrison and Geordie Johnson to become straight caricatures or clowns. Their style of acting and the bluish lighting set them apart from the rest of Paduan society and place them with the Lord, the tapster, Sly and the hostess in an English village. The village may be only a theatrical illusion, embracing another theatrical illusion; but it is not completely lost to reality: Sly and the Lord can easily cross from stage to auditorium and back, and Sly recovers his real identity when the play ends. Like the symbolically ambiguous white colour which partakes at once of both illusion and reality, this village can suffer illusions and revel in them; but, unlike Padua, it is not consumed by them. There, in Padua, plays never end and the masks are never taken off.

The production relates Katherina firmly to the village of the opening scene, the nearest point to reality in the play. Indeed, her moral progress can be seen as a movement away from Padua in the direction of the village, away from the corrupting materialism and artificiality of her social class towards a simpler, more natural though rugged mode of life.

This moral progress is paralleled and dramatically regulated by a similar movement from the sub-plot into the main-plot, and, eventually, as the production strongly indicates by many visual and tonal hints, into the outer framing plot where she may finally wake up to reality, like Sly. It is this opening-out movement, this setting forth, in the bedraggled tatters of a beggar, from the complete, self-absorbed theatricality of the sub-plot, to the kinder outer reaches of theatrical illusion represented by the framing plot (where masks thin out and

finally disappear) that gives the Katherina of this production relevance and moral weight.

By the end of the play, she is freed from all social images. Neither a shrew nor a submissive wife, she is finally just Katherina. She recovers herself just as Sly recovers himself, and the parallelism is constantly stressed by the colour of their apparel – white in both cases – and by the corresponding paradoxes of their appearances: one is a lady dressed as a beggar, the other, a beggar dressed as a lord. Both are also victims of practical jokes which, though good-natured, try their sanity. In both cases, someone insists that they are somebody else. But whereas the Lord throws Sly out of his house at the end of his play, Petruchio is only too happy to be led out by Katherina, out of Baptista's house and out of the play; and it is fit that Katherina should be the leader here. Petruchio had dragged her out by force from her father's house on their wedding day. She did not realize then that he was dragging her out of a thick forest of masks and pretences to throw her on the bare, rugged shores of reality. But what he took to be a simple job of taming a spoilt, shrewish brat into an obedient wife, became for Katherina a chance to find her real self. Bereft of everything – of clothes and finery, sleep and food, of even her customary social image as a shrew, Katherina is reduced, in appearance and reality, to a beggar, begging food of a servant; this teaches her not submissiveness, but tolerance, humility and something of the hardships of real life. Her situation in her husbands' house may be similar to her previous one in her father's, with the same choice – conform or be denied; but Petruchio never denies her love whatever else he withholds; and it is not only lip-service. In this production, Petruchio's expressions of love, more often than not, have a ring of genuine, tender affection, and

director Ian Talbot manipulated lighting and movement, in two important scenes (the kiss in the street and the final exit), to underline and foreground the couple's warm and genuine feelings for each other.

If Katherina does what Petruchio wants at the end, it is in the spirit of going along with the game, and because she loves him and knows he loves her. With her tolerance, she has gained a sense of humour, something that very few real egoists have. In the scene where she addresses old Vincentio as a "young and budding virgin" at Petruchio's behest, the director adds one significant detail: she bursts out laughing. She has become a partner in the game; and Petruchio joins her, acknowledging her as such. This detail settles the teasing question as to the tone of her last sermon. She delivers it in the same spirit, reveling in her eloquence, her performance and her ability to hold her audience of former preachers and denigrators, including her husband, in wondering awe. If their game was saying one thing and meaning another, she has beaten them at their own game. Kathryn Harrison delivered this speech superbly with the right measure of suppressed exultation, glowing triumph and the studied care of someone anxious not to give away the game. When she walked off triumphantly, at the end, with Petruchio close behind her, I and many other feminists in the auditorium breathed a deep sigh of relief; I could almost hear it above the rapturous applause.

Second-hand Shakespeare
at the Theatre Institute*

In the interval after the first, competently performed, acting project of students from the Theatre Institute — a sequence of scenes from *A Mid Summer Night's Dream* which included the slanging match between Hermia and Helena — I heard a student in the row behind me complain to her neighbour in a tone of righteous indignation: "How could they vulgarise Shakespeare like that? This is an acting project, not a commercial play! How could Galal El-Sharqawi (who directed the students) allow them to do that?" Intrigued, I turned around and asked: "Do what?" "Ad lib." She spat out the word in utter disgust. I was totally puzzled; the students had not interpolated a single word and the translation they used was meticulously accurate. I voiced my thoughts and was answered by a look of wild disbelief. "It's all in the text, I assure you," I told her. But her face told me clearly that I could not assure her in a million years.

But that young woman was not really to blame. The real culprit is Khalil Mutran who, like the proverbial bear with the lethal hug or like Othello, loved Shakespeare 'not wisely, but too well'. Curiously, he never knew the plays in the original, but through French translations; and yet he undertook the translation of the four famous tragedies plus *The Merchant of Venice* into Arabic. His passion for the bard was undoubtedly honest and his intentions worthy: to introduce Arabic readers to the great master and inspire them with sufficient awe towards

* 2.6.1994. In Arabic.

his (Shakespeare's) genius. The criterion of dramatic description then, in the aftermath of Ahmed Shawqi's verse dramas, was verbal, or, more accurately, rhetorical prowess. Being no dramatist made matters worse; Mutran, though a worthy pioneer, was completely deaf to tones and to linguistic shifts and variations, or maybe the French translations he used turned a blind eye to them. Whatever the reason, the plays in his Arabic version acquired an overblown, bombastic verbal character and a maddeningly numbing uniformity of tone and emotional texture — not to mention their many blatant mistakes and erratic omissions. Besides, in his zeal to outdo the verse dramatists of the day and raise Shakespeare a cut above them, he thickly overlaid his texts with archaisms, creating an outlandish brand of Arabic guaranteed to send you running to your dictionary at every line. It did not matter who was speaking, Lear or his Fool, Macbeth or his porter, they all spouted off in the same inflated declamatory style. The view of Shakespeare as grand orator and classical rhetorician was established then and still persists, stifling any real appreciation of his dramatic art. It has since fathered many a disastrous Shakespearean production in Arabic and a gallery of wooden performances. For nearly thirty years, Mutran's translations were the only ones available and this alone has endowed them with a halo of almost sanctified authority.

Since the 1960s, new translations of *Hamlet* (by Gabra Ibrahim Gabra and Abdel-Qadir El-Qott) and of *King Lear* (by Fatma Musa) have appeared, besides many translations of Shakespeare's plays. But old habits die hard; the new texts are definitely better, more actable and more faithful to the original, but people keep reverting to the all-hallowed. The actors may choke on and splutter the lumpy words and chunky mouthfuls of archaisms, or keep getting tangled up in the

convoluted syntactic coils or be forced alternatively to drone on or bark out, but they seem to love it. The old versions seem to them more in order with the inherited view of Shakespeare than the new fangled 'easy' translations.

In the late 1970s and the early eighties, Mohamed Enani and Samir Sarhan, the former a professor of English poetry and the latter of American and European drama at Cairo University, and both playwrights, tried in succession to rectify the situation. After translating *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and *Romeo and Juliet*, Enani rendered *The Merry Wives of Windsor* into the Egyptian dialect, gave the characters Egyptian names and set the scenes in Mameluke Egypt. His aim was to explode the false and oppressive shell of 'respectability' which had enclosed Shakespeare for years, barring him from any genuine understanding or enjoyment. But when the play was performed at Al-Tali'a, the critics rose up in arms to defend the hapless Shakespeare against such blasphemy; those who had never set eyes on the bard in the original were the loudest and the most virulent; they simply refused to believe that there could be 'Shakespeare without tears', that the dignified, unapproachable patriarch they had uncomprehendingly worshipped for so many years could be so funny, so accessible, so entertaining. Mercifully, the ordinary theatre-goers who flocked to the Tali'a every night for weeks had no such hangups.

Exactly the same thing happened a few years later when Sarhan, undaunted by Enani's example, translated first *As You Like It*, then *A Midsummer Night's Dream* into colloquial Arabic: the translator was viciously ridiculed in the press for his sacrilege, but the blissfully 'untutored' and unrepentant audience came in swarms.

Watching and suffering the second acting project that evening, a few scenes from *Macbeth* in Mutran's version, with which the poor students pathetically and desperately struggled, I knew exactly to which side I belonged, that I was definitely a plebeian. I remembered Samir El-Asfouri's ironical dig at 'serious art' and theatre in his production of Ionesco's *The Critic* — "a serious production is solely recognisable and definable by the amount of boredom and suffering it causes the audience." Watching the students trip and stumble over their lines, I did not wonder so many of their predecessors carefully kept away from serious theatre after graduation or ran a mile at the mere mention of Shakespeare.

Shapes of Fancy:

The Oxford Stage Company's *Twelfth Night**

It was a mild March evening; but inside the auditorium of Al-Gomhoria theatre, last Wednesday, it was freezing. The Opera management, who has recently 'annexed' and refurbished this old and elegant building, had put the newly-installed cooling system on maximum, apparently in honour of the many lush mink coats and stoles floating about and milling around the foyer. It was a typical Opera House audience — the kind you never see except when there is a visiting foreign show. The women, with very few exceptions, were all dressed to the nines, and exquisitely perfumed and made up; and the men — despite a faint air of boredom, looked smart and opulent in their obligatory ties. (As in the main Opera House hall, here, in this down-town annex, ties are mandatory and admittance is conditional on the wearing of a full suit). I wondered if the boredom was due to the absence of a bar; a drink can help you swallow anything — even Shakespeare. Above the hum of polished voices, in which English, French and Arabic indistinctly merged, I overheard a woman exclaim to a friend with a tinkle of amused laughter that her husband had adamantly refused to accompany her; "said he'd already swallowed too much of the Bard at school and couldn't stomach more." I secretly sympathised with the defector; I had already heard a young instructor at the English Department of Cairo University express a similar sentiment. Somebody ought to do the Bard a favour and banish him from school

* 28.3.1996. In English.

curricula; flunking your Shakespeare can put you off him for life. I looked around me and longed for the homey atmosphere of the National and missed its variegated audience. Ideally, one should watch Shakespeare from the pit, among the groundlings.

The Oxford State Company, however, soon put an end to all such musings; their warm presence filled the stage and flooded into the auditorium, chasing away the icy air. I was curious to see what this bunch of excellent players would make of this play's vexing, problematic shapes of fancy. Unlike many, I do not regard *Twelfth Night* as a 'pure', 'sunny' comedy (if there is ever such a thing), and the most interesting productions of it invariably argue against such a conclusion. In one such interesting production (which visited Cairo some years back) the action took place on a small, revolving disc in the middle of the stage, and the actors, with their hands attached to visible strings hanging down from the flies, moved and delivered their lines like humans transformed by some evil magic into wooden marionettes and struggling to break free. It was a moving metaphor which brought out one latent aspect of the play.

In the present Oxford Stage Company production, the accent fell on sexual confusion, and the performance unfolded through sharp contrasts — quite startling at times — of shapes, colours, textures and movement patterns. The boldly red and blue set, consisting of a huge, blue screen at the back, flanked with red ones, and two blue bridges, on both sides of the stage, supported on thin poles, with climbing steps and ladders, looked bare, cold, and geometrically forbidding, The costumes, on the other hand, were predominantly of soft or rich pile fabric and warm colours (brown, rust, beige and green). The contrast

was further deepened by the addition of black and white and became positively disturbing with the alternation in the style of acting between sentimentality, naturalism and broad music-hall comedy. It felt as if Viola had arrived from the sea into a toy, mechanical world of coloured blocks, childish and sinister at once.

The sense of unreality was heightened by the confusion of styles in the costumes (suggesting widely divergent periods) and by the open theatricality of the highly musical Feste, (superbly performed by David Brett). Director John Retallack deliberately kept him on stage all the time: when he was not playing his part among the characters or talking to the audience, he was on one of the bridges, playing a variety of instruments (like a master of revels leading the tune), or simply watching the other actors down there. The only other characters who are allowed this superior vantage point are Sir Toby Belch and Maria who are, likewise, 'jesters'. This makes the world of Illyria seem like one big practical joke, manipulated by some invisible super clown. Clearly, the metaphor 'all the world is a stage' was in the director's mind as he conceived his show.

But however artificial the world of Illyria is made to appear in this show, the pain and confusion of Viola and Olivia feel real enough. Indeed, Kate Fleetwood and Lisa Turner put so much urgency and sensual passion into their performances as to make us rethink the relationship of these two fictional characters. Suddenly, Olivia's attraction to another female in drag becomes deeply suggestive and problematic, and the issue of sexual identity comes to the fore. A feminist critic might read a lot in this show and would be quick to remind us that in Shakespeare's days both parts were played by males.

But feminism apart, I wished that this Malvolio (played by Jonathan Coyne as an exaggerated caricature) had proved more menacing and less pathetic. It would have made him more relevant to an audience under the threat of rising religious fundamentalism.

What Country, Friends, Is This?

Twelfth Night at the AUC*

What Shakespeare's Illyria looks like is anybody's guess: it can have as many images as *Twelfth Night* has readers, and these can range from the soberly realistic to the highly fanciful. I have seen different projections of it on stage and television, including one set in Regency England, another in a vaguely oriental atmosphere, and one in a circus-tent-cum-marionette-show. In Paul T. Mitri's imagination, however, as he mentions in his director's note in the programme of the recent *Twelfth Night* production at the Wallace, Illyria "always seemed ... a place as glitzy and fascinating as a 1940's movie musical, but just as shallow and superficial beneath the surface."

This metaphoric updating of Illyria in terms of an enormously popular musical form and plebeian culture is symptomatic of the director's general approach to the classics, particularly Shakespeare, which, without trivialising the play or sacrificing its substance, unabashedly aims for accessibility, entertainment, and strives at all costs to avoid what Mitri calls "extreme hallowness". It is also eminently suited to a play which begins and ends in music, is saturated with it, and where "old and antique" songs are pointedly contrasted with "light airs and recollected terms / Of these most brisk and giddy-paced times." Indeed, with five songs "among the most beautiful Shakespeare wrote," according to Auden, and so much emphasis on music as the food of love, languor, or mirth, or as pure pleasure, as it is

* 6.4.2000. In English.

for Feste, the play seems virtually an invitation to wallow in music as much as Orsino does in sentiment.

Besides, as an elaborate, sumptuous fabrication, the romantic musical comedy evolved by American show biz, with its tinsel world and tenuous hold on reality, seems an ideal theatrical vehicle for a play where most of the principal characters indulge in protective or compensatory fantasies and the whole action springs from, and is propelled by, the artifice of disguise. Also in favour of Mitri's novel conception is the vaudeville-like construction of the play which constantly shifts between plots and locations, creating a sense of fragmentariness which draws away the interest of the audience from the development of the narrative line and focuses it squarely on each individual scene. In fact, of all Shakespeare's comedies, *Twelfth Night* strikes me as the closest in structure to a variety show consisting of conventional comic sketches, slap-stick acts, and song-and-dance routines. What makes it come across as something more and gives it a kind of unity and coherence is Shakespeare's power to make his mood and poetry override his fable and the comic convention in which it is set.

Critics have repeatedly noted the play's wistfulness, "the silvery undertone of sadness" (in Middleton Murry's beautiful phrase) which runs through it; and Feste, alone at the end, singing of the wind and the rain, was seen as lamenting "the passing of innocence, the passing of all things," and compared to old Firs who is forgotten and left behind at the end of Chekov's *Cherry Orchard*, and sits alone, in the deserted, locked-up house, with nothing breaking the silence except (as the stage directions mention) "a distant sound ... like the sound of a string

snapping, slowly and sadly dying away" and "the sound of an axe striking a tree in the orchard far away." Any decent production is bound to communicate this wistful mood in some degree. In Mitri's case, however, the challenge was to make it come across through an artistic convention inherently inimical to it, indeed, to make the combination of glamour and superficiality which mark that convention instrumental in generating it.

He managed this by placing his 1940s' movie musical elements — the costumes (by Joseph Anderson), the dance routines he himself choreographed, the delightfully funny and nostalgic soundtrack (which he designed with Mohammed El-Sawi and Melissa Daw) — in a curious set by Timaree McCormick (who also designed the light) in collaboration with John Small and the director. At once faintly realistic, suggesting an elegant drawing room of a person in high society, and also highly formal and artificial, it consisted of a stage painted blue all round, including the sides, and hung at the top with looped-up gauze in the shape of tufts of white clouds, touched purple at the edges by the light. A few steps at the back led to an imposing large wall of dark mirrors which we soon discovered consisted of doors. When these opened, they revealed behind them nothing but an extension of the same blueness in front. The impression was of a pale, watery world where sky and sea melted into each other and were only artificially divided by a fragile sheet of glass reflecting dim, fleeting shadows. The only stable points in this disturbingly fluid world were a pale blue chaise longue which seemed to melt into the surrounding blueness of the fictional sea, occasionally suggesting a raft bobbing up on the waves; a white side-bar topped with a variety of alcoholic drinks to which the characters in Orsino's and Olivia's households frequently and liberally helped

themselves, becoming progressively inebriated and enveloped in an almost palpable alcoholic haze; and a bluish-white gramophone playing a medley of songs and tunes which violently clashed with Shakespeare's language and the historical period it evokes, effecting startling temporal leaps. Thus the impression of spatial fluidity created by the set was matched and complemented by a vivid sense of temporal fluidity created by sound, compounding the sense of unreality.

All the characters, including the servants and attendants, and even the rescued Sebastian, wore full evening dress throughout or most of the time, suggesting that the whole action took place in one night during a party, or, rather, that the world of Illyria was but one continuous party — an eternal round of dancing, boozing, masquerading and revelry. On a few occasions, the four clever dancers (Nora Abu Steit, Salima Barakat, Hani Eskander, and Luke Lehner), who efficiently doubled in all the minor parts, briefly changed their appearance to suit the occasion; but the only significant costume changes were Viola's, at the beginning, when she exchanged her simple grey dress for tails; Maria's, halfway through, when she replaced her austere secretary's suit with a gaudy party dress; Malvolio's, for his appearance cross-gartered; Feste's disguise as Sir Topas the curate; and Olivia's golden yellow gown after her marriage to Sebastian. Equally intriguing in the updated visual makeup of this production was the transformation of Antonio, the sea captain and Sebastian's friend (Nelly Ali), into a cartoon image of a movie female gangster, dressed in furs, a peaked hat, and a red wrap-over skirt, and complete with hoarse voice and thick drawl.

But weirdly or elegantly dressed, in black, red, or gold, the actors stood out vividly against the pervasive pale blue of the set. At the same time, however, their reflections in the imposing dark mirror at the back made them pale out into shadow. Despite their colourful, boisterous presence, they seemed to me like phantoms, conjured up out of the sea to float on its waves for a while then melt away. At every minute, the stage-image was a visual paradox speaking at once of impermanence and endless recurrence, of the life and light on the surface of the sea, and the death lurking in the dark depths. The most powerful moment, however, was when the large mirror-doors were flung wide open to hurl Viola in, and the blank, pale blue behind them recalled the blank white sheets which covered the whole stage, like a shroud, at the beginning before Feste (Hala Said), in tails and top hat, ceremoniously removed them to herald the beginning of the show; he was there at the end too, alone, still in black: Charlie Chaplin? or undertaker? He sang his wistful song, danced up the steps towards the dark mirror to finally disappear behind (or is it into?) it. In Shakespeare's play, Viola is thrust by the sea onto the shores of Illyria; in Mitri's production, she literally comes out of the blue into a world of glittering splintered glass.

For some dark reason I have yet to fathom, the sight of Viola stepping on the blue painted floor of the stage for the first time reminded me of the queen of Sheba's arrival in the magical court of King Solomon where "a stalwart of the jinn" had transferred her throne on Solomon's orders. I recalled a verse from the Quran I thought I had forgotten: "It was said unto her: Enter the hall. And when she saw it she deemed it a pool and bared her legs. Solomon said: Lo! it is a hall, made smooth, of glass. She said: My Lord! Lo! I have wronged myself."

In this captivatingly glamorous and painfully unreal trap of a world that Mitri and his brilliant artistic crew created, the actors performances were fittingly orchestrated according to their type and degree of studied artificiality. Some of the cast I had already seen and admired in Mitri's previous production of Moliere's *L'Avare* (his first in Cairo) a few months ago. It was an exciting and memorable production, vibrant, fast-paced, highly imaginative and devastatingly funny — the best of the play I have seen in Egypt or anywhere in the Arab world. In it, Karim Bishay took the lead as Harpagon, managing with finesse and dexterity the complex and intricately detailed physical and vocal patterns Mitri devised for him. As Sir Toby Belch in *Twelfth Night*, he was again a constant source of joy, playing the character as a kind of domesticated Falstaff, but younger and spry, with a sense of style. Nadine Khidr who presented in L'Avare a feline, predatory, seductive and garishly made-up Frosine, and was every inch a woman, albeit in a strip cartoon kind of way, presented here a credible Viola. Her height, deep voice and strong features were an asset and helped her to cope with her difficult trans-sexual part without appearing in the slightest degree butch. Indeed, at several points in the play, including some of the most hilarious scenes, particularly the duel with Sir Andrew, she managed to communicate, quite poignantly, her feeling of panic, confusion, helplessness and deep insecurity. Her joy at meeting her brother was touchingly genuine, and her secret love for the Duke had the moving ring of truth. Mariam Abu Oaf too was a surprise. Her elegant, confident, sophisticated and stylishly effete Olivia was the complete opposite of her timid, shy and breathlessly romantic Marianne in Moliere's play. As Malvolio, Karim El-Fouly was fittingly pompous, haughty, sardonically disdainful, and, when cross-gartered, openly

farcical. Equally delightful were Ratko Ivekovic as Orsino, Sherif Guoneim as Sebastian, Mohamed Ali as Sir Andrew Aguecheek (looking endeeringly befuddled all the time), and, of course, Nelly Ali as Antonia. But one cannot mention the actors without giving credit to their coach, Eric Grischkat. Without his guidance, I doubt the actors could have made their way through the mazes of Illyria and come out safe.

Royal Buffoonery:

King Lear at the National*

Any production of a revered classic, particularly in a cultural context other than that of the original text, is bound to foreground the question of audience expectations. More often than not, such expectations are not born out of any direct exposure to the text (in reading or performance) without preconceptions, but tend to originate in academic institutions and the writings of prestigious critics and authoritative literary figures and are passed on from one generation to another, without scrutiny or revision, in the name of refined taste and high culture. Nowhere is this more clearly exemplified than in the case of Shakespeare in Egypt. He was first introduced to Egyptian audiences in the early 20th century by veteran classical actor, George Abyad, in a forbidding halo of respect as an awesome classical model, a tragic poet of unparalleled genuis, a great moralist and grand rhetorician. The archaic, stilted, overblown and heavily ornate Arabic into which the plays – not only *Othello*, *Hamlet*, or *King Lear*, but also *The Merchant of Venice* and *The Taming of the Shrew* – were declaimed, ranted and spluttered from the stage further intimidated the audience, deepening the sense of awe and making those early productions real feats of cultural browbeating. The implicit message was that if you did not like what you saw, then, clearly, something was wrong with you.

This misleadingly narrow and elitist view of Shakespeare was bequeathed to subsequent generations and progressively fortified by

* 4.4.2002. In Arabic.

translations of traditional Western criticism, such as Bradley's *Shakespearean Tragedy* (mandatory reading in all English literature department in Egyptian universities at one time). The fact that Shakespeare was an actor who never made it to university, consistently flouted the classical rules, and was a member of a commercial theatre company who sought above all to delight its customers, whatever the means, was discreetly ignored and so were all the bawdy, naughty, skeptical or sacrilegious bits in the plays which were either tacitly removed or phrased in such pompous language that made them sound more like ethical edicts or profound philosophical musings.

Surprisingly, the spirit of experimentation which informed the Egyptian theatre in the 1960s left that stultifying Shakespearean cult quite untouched. Between 1963 and 1965, three consecutive National theatre productions of *Macbeth*, *Othello* and *Hamlet* (the first two starring Hamdi Gheith, the third, Karam Metaweh) flaunted the old grandiose, pseudo-classical mode in full opulence, with all the clichéd paraphernalia. The audience loved them, and so did most of the critics; there was nothing there that ruffled the inherited expectations of either. The stereotypical view of Shakespeare initiated by George Abyad and his contemporaries seemed to have finally and irrevocably stuck to him like an ugly odour that all the perfumes of Arabia could neither sweeten nor dispel. When British director, Deborah Warner, arrived in Cairo, in 1987, with her Kick company, and presented *King Lear* at Al-Gomhoria theatre in the mode of a harsh black comedy (á la Antonin Artaud's *Theatre of Cruelty*, popularized by Peter Brook), with a crippled female fool, doubling as Cordelia, almost completely naked actors, climbing and jumping off ladders and pouring buckets of water all over the stage in the storm scene, while the octogenarian king

pranced around in his underwear, the production was dismissed as experimental horseplay. When she came back two years later, in 1989, with the British National Theatre company, with a more sedate production of the same play – this time, in a bare, ascetic, anti-emotional-identification style, reminiscent of Brecht's epic theatre – the verdict was even more negative: the proverbial 'English coldness' was often trotted out to explain the sense of icy emptiness communicated by the production and many complained that they had looked very hard for the king Lear they know and love, but could not find him.

Warner's two visits, however, despite the lukewarm reception and adverse criticism, did create a ripple. They showed some young directors here that there were ways of approaching Shakespeare other than those of the National. More significantly, they revealed to them that far from being a rigid, priggish, old-fashioned and extremely verbose pontiff (as the traditional productions or drama classes made him out to be), he was lively, highly theatrical, full of tricks, great fun, and insidiously subversive to boot. At last they had a Shakespeare they could love and play with. In 1991, a young director, Mohamed Abdel-Hadi, embarked on what could only be described as a thoroughly insane project – a production of *King Lear* at the small hall of El-Tali'a (avant-garde) theatre, with only six actors, no sets (except a small round platform in the middle over which hangs a crown) and invasively, indeed defiantly, subtitled, "a grotesque, farcical travesty."

It was not like any of the run-of-the-mill parodies of Shakespeare you come across in many countries. It was *King Lear* alright, but slightly shortened, more condensed, and projected from the point of

view of the fool. With the help of simple, black cloaks, huge masks (with hoods attached) which grotesquely caricatured their real features, stylized movement patterns marked by exaggeration and distortion and significant vocal and gestural changes, the six actors – five men and one woman (Salwa Mohamed Ali who plays Regan in the National's current production of the play) – doubled and trebled in all the parts, like most travelling troupes in Shakespeare's day, and they did it with such amazing efficiency that it was difficult sometimes to guess which actor was playing which part under the mask. The constant fusing and splitting of the characters as the actors wore the horrible masks to enact the wicked characters, or took them off to impersonate the good ones, invested the whole performance with a deeply unsettling sense of fluidity, giving it a surrealistic quality, as if it was a nightmare experienced by the fool in the grave, long after the storm was over.

In my review of that production on 21 March 1991, I described it as "the real thing;" not only had it eschewed the dominant, antiquated view of Lear, enshrined by George Abyad's rumbling performance in 1927, but had also embraced wholeheartedly the in-built comic potential of the play, its prevalent sense of existential absurdity, of transience and instability, as well as its unmistakable folk-tale provenance and unashamed exploitation of the tradition of the rough- and-tumble popular comedy of its day and the conventional patter and routines of clowns. For Abdel-Hadi, I added, the world of *King Lear*, the one he evoked on stage, was one where witches, monsters and hobgoblins rubbed shoulders with the rugged illusion-makers of a rough itinerant show, and the essence of Lear's tragedy did not lie in his dethronement as king and head of the family, but rather in his self-abnegation as tragic hero. Needless to say, Abdel-Hadi's *Lear* was suspiciously received,

sparking off a controversy about how much freedom artists should allow themselves when dealing with the classics.

No such controversy surrounded a revival of *Macbeth* at the National which opened the same month; it was all as it should be, or, rather, as everybody expected it to be – i.e., deadly dull – and everyone heaved a sigh of relief. And the sense of relief was compounded when, in the following year, Ahmed Isma'il produced *King Lear* for a regional Mass Culture theatre troupe in Mansoura in a highly melodramatic vein which swung us safely back to the 19th century. With a history of raving Shakespearean heroes, histrionically strutting and fretting on the Egyptian stage for decades, melodrama could easily pass for tragedy, even supplant it, and, therefore, Isma'il doing *King Lear* as a strident melodrama was on much surer grounds than Abdel-Hadi. Predictably, almost tragically, I would say, Abdel-Hadi never attempted another Shakespearean mad venture.

It is against this background that one can best appreciate the current production of *King Lear* at the National and understand its phenomenal popularity with both audiences and critics – including even the most finicky and nitpicking ones. Despite its many faults and shortcomings, it seems to work for almost everybody, operating or, rather, transmitting, as it were, on many different wave lengths – which takes us back to the question of audience expectations. What do the people who flock to the National every night, filling it to brimming point, expect to see? And why is it they are so genuinely delighted and excited (rather than awed and intimidated) with what they see that they keep coming back, bringing along fresh spectators every time? Is it simply the irresistible chubby–baby charm of super star Yehia El-Fakharani

and his overwhelmingly bewitching presence? But who would want to see this delightful, attractive actor, still in his fifties, as an irascible, cantankerous, doddering old fool? One can understand El-Fakharani's reasons for taking on the part: it is a tremendous, daunting challenge. But only a demented director, hysterically obsessed with experimentation would think of casting him in it. Was it just a stroke of luck? Or part of a bigger, intentional design?

Ahmed Abdel-Halim frankly admits that he never sought the honour of directing *King Lear*; rather, it was thrust upon him by the indefatigable Huda Wasfi, the former director of the National, a year before she resigned her post. He accepted the assignment with great trepidation and freezing feet. His spell at The Royal Academy of Dramatic Arts (RADA) in London, back in the 1960s (where he gave a memorable performance of Othello for his graduation project) had made him wary of Shakespeare and alerted him to the many dangerous pitfalls and slippery paths of his plays. More than any other Egyptian director, he was aware of the enormous difficulties and hard choices any production of an elusive, protean text like *King Lear* would involve. He had read the stage-history of the play in its country of origin, as well as in Europe, and knew how disconcerting critics, since Goethe and Coleridge, and actors, since Betterton, had found it, and how much hacking and mauling it had undergone at the hands of directors.

Luckily for Abdel-Halim, he had happened to be in England at the time director Peter Hall, as head of the Royal Shakespeare Company, was initiating a new method of producing Shakespeare. The four seminal precepts which constituted Hall's new method were: liveliness, textual care, social relevance and theatrical totality. With these provisos

in mind, Abdel-Halim embarked upon his *Lear*, carefully steering it on a middle course between innovation and conventionality. His Lear would be the extreme opposite of George Abyad and the horde of classical actors who toed his line; hence Yehia El-Fakharani. To further disorient the audience and splinter their traditional pattern of expectations, he chose for the role of the vicious, demonical Edmund, the bastard son of the Earl of Gloucester, Ahmed Salama, who always plays 'the good boy' in television soap operas, giving him a marvellous opportunity to prove his versatility – which he did, and quite magnificently too, taking the audience into his confidence with the kind of unabashed theatricality one usually associates with Iago. For the two evil sisters, he cast the lovely, willowy Sawsan Badr, who has wrung our hearts with her poignant performance in her recent film *Closed Doors*, and the 'petite', explosively sexy, but outwardly innocent-looking and childlike, Salwa Mohamed Ali. The performances of the rest of the cast, uniformly competent, and some of them quite vibrant – like Mohamed Nagi's Kent, Emad El-Arousi's Edgar/Poor Tom, Rushdi El-Shami's Oswald, and Magdi El-Edrisi's Cornwall – tended more or less to conform to what the ordinary spectator would expect from the characters they represent.

But what kind of world did Abdel-Halim cast all those lovely performers and intriguing characters into? It was definitely a palpably stagy world – the kind of world you would expect from any rugged illusion-makers of a rough itinerant show. It was more polished though, with lots of tinsel and glitter, like a conventional, commercial Christmas pantomime. The show has that kind of ambience – the atmosphere of a festive make-believe charade. To bring Lear nearer home and achieve 'social relevance', the director wisely used Fatma

Musa's lucid and infinitely accessible translation and harped, somewhat simplistically, on the theme of the ingratitude of children towards their parents, cashing in on the current wave of public dismay triggered by news stories of sons butchering their mothers (Sawsan Badr's *Closed Doors* features such a crime) or chucking their old, feeble fathers out onto the streets. He also unearthed the fool, whom Shakespeare had safely disposed of in the third act, to recite short poems by Ahmed Fouad Nigm, and roped in Rageh Dawood with some mellifluous tunes for accompaniment. For 'liveliness', Abdel-Halim used dancers to represent the storm and battle scenes, impressive sword-duels, back projections of thick clouds racing across a stormy sky, dripping rain which looked like thick clots of white blood, and painted plastic backdrops which seemed to shudder all the time.

Of 'theatrical totality', very loosely interpreted, the show achieved a substantial measure. Apart from the music, the dancing, the fencing and Nigm's intrusive lyrics, the acting displayed such a dizzying mixture of styles that made one imagine one was watching three or four different plays running simultaneously – a chilling melodrama, a realistic domestic teagedy, a farce, a pathetic black comedy and a classical heroic epic. Strangely enough, each was convincing in its own way, and executed with plenty of verve and panache. But what held the show together and gave it some semblance of coherence was the acting, particularly El-Fakharani's and the evil trio's (Sawsan, Salwa and Salama). Together, they managed to inject a sense of reality in what is ultimately a Christmas pantomime and to soar above the long-established, hallowed traditions without completely severing all connections with them.

The Moor in Mansoura:

A provincial *Othello* in colloquial Arabic*

In the autumn of 1962, I watched my first Arabic *Othello* at the old Opera House in Ataba square. Khalil Mutran's recondite classical Arabic translation was an ideal medium for veteran classical actor Hamdi Gheith, who played the Moor, and gave him ample opportunity to flex his declamatory muscles. What has remained of this experience, after so many years, is an impression of heroic bombast and grandiloquent pathos. The final scene was the emotional peak of Gheith's performance: he began his "Soft you" speech in a low, rumbling voice which gradually rose in a menacing crescendo to a frenzied pitch in the words "and smote him thus" which accompany the act of stabbing himself. A moment of deadly silence followed this verbal hurricane, then suddenly, Gheith flung his majestic corporeal mass on the floor and sent it hurtling down the steps leading from Desdemona's bed at the back, stopping just at the moment it seemed about to roll onto the laps of the audience in the first row.

Hussein Abdel Qadir (a lecturer in psychology with a long history in the Egyptian theatre), who had played Cassio in the 1962 production, was among the company on the rickety bus which trundled us to Mansoura last weak to watch *Othello* in colloquial Arabic. He introduced me to the translator, Mustafa Safwan, an eminent Egyptian psychoanalyst resident in Paris. At 79, he had more energy and mental agility than most of us and impressed us with his vast knowledge of Arabic, French and English literature. The conversation inevitably

* 13.4.2002. In Arabic.

centred on the perennial and passionately controversial issue of colloquial versus classical Arabic. Safwan is a fervent champion of the former and a fierce opponent of the supermacy of the latter, describing it as a class-related form of oppression. Like Mustafa Musharafa, the Egyptian scientist who wrote a whole novel in colloquial Arabic in the twenties, the vast contingent of Arab dramatists and dramaturges who have fought over decades to crown it on the stage, and the many poets, including Biram El-Tonsi, Salah Jahin and Fouad Hadad, who have honed it into an admirable vehicle for poetic expression, Safwan insists on writing in colloquial Arabic and regards the linguistic dichotomy in Arab societies as a highly destructive form of cultural schizophrenia and a tool of political and social hegemony.

As a life-long member of the Left (whose father, though an Azharite sheikh, founded the first Egyptian Socialist party in 1923 and was rewarded with a long spell in jail), Safwan's linguistic views have firm ideological underpinnings. He makes them amply clear in both his introduction to the text of his translation (published by the Anglo-Egyptian Bookshop) where he quotes from Dante's unfinished Latin treatise, *De vulgari eloquentia*, to support his argument, and his translator's note in the programme of the Mansoura production – both written in colloquial Arabic. In the latter he succinctly says: "a people who do not respect the language they speak and consider it unf.. for literature and education can never have self-respect, a say in the shaping of their destiny, or the power to make their rulers heed their will." Though colloquial Arabic has become an accepted medium for contemporary realistic drama, and is sporadically used in translations of foreign texts, including three Shakespearean comedies (M. Enani's *The Merry Wives of Windsor* and S. Sarhan's *As You Like It* and *A*

Midsummer Night's Dream – all performed in the eighties and all savagely attacked for 'degrading' the texts to the level of 'street language'), it has been almost completely banned in the area of tragedy — almost, because in the early eighties, No'man Ashour, the father of Egyptian realistic drama, published a translation of *Othello* in colloquial Arabic in the *Theatre Magazine*. It was never performed and was generally dismissed as a mere whim, forgivable in a great author, and hopefully never to be repeated.

Safwan was not aware of Ashour's venture before embarking on his own, and though his translation is more accurate than Ashour's and renders the original almost word for word, it does not feel, perhaps for this very reason, quite at home in the medium it uses. The words are colloquial, but the structure and idiom strike one as somewhat alien. This was particularly noticable in Othello's speeches and poetic flights, and he was by far the character who suffered most in this transaction. Iago, uniformly prosaic and obscene, fared better; yet, he too, as well as all the characters, used images, expressions, modes of swearing and syntactical constructions no colloquial Arabic-speaker (of whatever degree of education) would use. This is perhaps inevitable in any translation into colloquial Arabic (a volatile medium deeply enmeshed in contemporary social experience and everyday life) of a text which lies outside the boundaries of realism. And may be this is the cost Safwan has to pay for wanting to expand, renew, and enrich his chosen medium. In performance, however, one hardly had time to ponder such problems and incongruities; they were soon forgotten in the bustling spectacle on stage. The audience loved it, even though George Abyad, whose bombastic Othello frequently graced the boards between the wars, was frantically spinning in his grave.

Put Out the Light:

An Egyptian revival of *Othello* at Al-Hanager*

Recently the head of the State Theatre Organization, Hani Metaweh, announced that in view of the phenomenal success of the National theatre's current revival of *King Lear*, he has decided that at least one Shakespearean classic should be staged every season. *The Merchant of Venice* is already in the pipeline, with intensive negotiations afoot to persuade Syrian comedian Dreed Lahham to hop over to Cairo to undertake Shylock. Good news, you might say, and long overdue. But having seen the sloppy, sentimental mishmash that passed for *King Lear* – which came across as a Christmas pantomime, complete with tinsel, glitter and nimble-footed dancers – I dread to think of what fate awaits the poor *Merchant*. At present, with Arab anti-Israeli feeling at its highest, it is conceivable that we may end up with a farcical, grotesque figure, more loathsome (if that were possible) than even Marlowe's Barabas, otherwise known as *The Jew of Malta*, masquerading as Shakespeare's Jew. Shylock could even be treated to the same gruesome fate as Barabas and tricked into falling through a trapdoor in a balcony into a 'fiery pit' below.

But whatever mangling the proposed *Merchant* may undergo, it could not conceivably compare with what *Othello* is currently being subjected to at the hands of director Mohamed El-Kholi at Al-Hanager. His choice of Khalil Mutran's unwieldy, bombastic translation was unfortunate to begin with; but his efforts to improve it by updating

* 11.7.2002. In Arabic.

certain archaic words and rephrasing some of the heavily rhetorical passages in commonplace, often banal language made it worse, landing the audience with a disconcerting verbal patchwork. One was constantly being jolted from the spuriously sublime and turgidly grandiloquent to the pompously ridiculous and flatly mundance. He could have spared us the misery, and himself the embarrassment, had he chosen a more recent, smoother translation, like Hussein Ahmed Amin's, done in the mid 1990s and published by Dar El-Ma'aref.

El-Kholi's messing about with Mutran's language extended to Shakespeare's text; it was recklessly hacked and mauled and, but for the opening scene, grimly expurgated, then flung onto the stage, a maimed, lifeless body dressed up in gaudy tatters. Whole scenes were excised and others ruthlessly adumbrated, which put paid to all the subtleties of characterization as well as to the text's religious nuances, recurrent images and intricate thematic interplay. Bianca was axed, probably in the interest of chastity, and what was left of Desdemona's part could make her wish she had been lopped off too. But Iago got the worst of this dramatic carnage. With all his satanic soliloquies and confiding asides to the audience removed, he became a flat paper cutout, more boring than even the dullest stereotype of the villain in nineteenth-century melodrama. Watching this spiritless, lacklustre travesty of Iago made me long for the wit and vitality of Ahmed Salama's rendering of that other fascinating Shakespearean villain, Edmund, in the National's *King Lear*. But then, Ahmed Salama had a more experienced director with a good sense of what works in theatre. Whatever the faults of Ahmed Abdel-Halim's production of *Lear*, at least he always kept the audience in mind and would not sacrifice a

good line or a thrilling theatrical moment in the name of some glibly trotted-out 'new reading' or newfangled directorial conception.

In an epigraph to his novel, *Nostromo*, Joseph Conrad confessed that history had taught him to distrust all causes; "the worst atrocities," he said, "are always committed in the name of good causes." Likewise, the butchery that *Othello* suffered at the hands of El-Kholi was purportedly done in a good cause – namely, in the director's own words, "to rehabilitate the negative image of the Arab male" he takes the Moor to represent by removing anything that mars this image from the play, while, at the same time, "preserving the spirit of Shakespearean tragedy and presenting a classical performance in the true sense of the word, with all the grandeur and sanctity it implies." What exactly he means by "grandeur and sanctity" is anybody's guess. With quite breathtaking arrogance, "begging your pardon, Shakespeare", El-Kholi goes on to defend his ham-fisted actions by making Shakespeare out to be a racist, who portrays Othello as "a bedouin who has never known civilization." Following El-Kholi's logic, if a European were to subject the play to the same ideological reading, s/he would find Iago a most offensive representative of European culture. However difficult *Othello* may be as a play, and it is, in fact, quite problematic when it comes to directing, often suggesting the image of Iago as a master puppeteer manipulating the fates of all as if they were marionettes, it takes a singular blindness to see in it a racist attack on Arabs rather than an exploration of cultural alienation and subliminal racial discrimination. To blindly rush in without the slightest awareness of these issues is simply absurd.

El-Kholi's pretentious claim to improving on Shakespeare's portrayal of Othello is impelled by a self-defensive, jingoistic urge to idealise what he calls 'the Arab character' and stems from a deplorably simplistic and reductive reading (or, rather, misreading) of Othello's character and, indeed, of the whole play. While this may explain (though not excuse) his extensive slashing of the text in the interest of building up the Moor into a flawless Arab hero, it is difficult to square his pompous claim to classical grandeur and sublimity with the pulpy sentimentality of the whole performance. Take the opening scene for instance: against a loud chorus of twittering birds, in a soft blue haze, Othello prances in, in thigh-high elegant tan boots, with painted face and wig, followed by Desdemona, heavily made up, in golden high heels and flowing white robes edged with fur (like the heroine of a soppy Hollywood musical); for a while, they chase each other playfully (and somewhat clumsily) around two white fluttering sheets, stretched across the stage and manipulated by mysterious hands in the wings, before they finally embrace and set to waltzing. Throughout, Desdemona (Dina Abdallah) displayed an embarrassing tendency to gush and flush by turns, then coyly flit away, while Othello (Ahmed Maher), in striving after grandeur and sublimity, avoided the usual ranting and raving associated in Egypt with so-called classical plays; instead, he chose to hiss and grunt and occasionally growl. It was painful to watch him, arms resolutely akimbo and legs firmly apart, struggling to deliver his lines while maintaining this unnaturally deep and lugubrious tone. I wished sometimes his voice would fail him – to give us a break, and him too; but he heroically persevered and maintained it, relentlessly, without a moment's relief, till the very end.

The less said about the other actors, the better; El-Kholi's 'adaptation' never gave them a chance. Hisham Abdallah, as Iago, was pathetic, and his frantic efforts to make something out of what was left of his part were heart-rending, and so were Galal El-Hagrasi's antics as Roderigo. About the only one who managed to keep afloat was Amani El-Bahtiti as Emilia, and this only because her part was the least affected by the director's mania for cutting.

The costumes, you will already have guessed from my description of the opening scene, were atrocious in colour, design and fit and Magdi El-Zaqazeeqi's choreography was haphazard and clumsy. As for the sets, they consisted mostly of gaudily-painted flats and made one often wonder if Othello had not wandered by mistake into a children's picture book. However, they had the virtue of appearing and disappearing quickly, which made the blackouts needed for set changes quite brief. The only really decent thing in the show was Mursi El-Khattab's music (whether composed or compiled the programme does not say, but one gets the impression that it might be the latter), particularly the short prelude of pattering, light notes on the piano and deep strains on the violin. The director would have done well to inject more of it into the show – to sedate the audience, if nothing else.

Having seen Hamdi Gheith declaim Othello in Mutran's hallowed translation from the boards of the National in the early 1960s, two versions of the play (one in colloquial Arabic) in the provinces in the 1980s, then, last year, a farcical parody of it based on No'man Ashour's colloquial translation and staged by the Youth Theatre as a kind of *jeu d'esprit*, I had thought I had seen the worst Egyptian Othellos. El-Kholi, however, managed to surprise me, and, for this at least, I give him credit.

Moments of Mirth:

A multinational A *Midsummer Night's Dream* at the Jesuits Cultural Centre in Alexandria*

Of late, theatre-going has become a guilt-ridden experience. It gets more acute if the show is good; for a few blessed moments you forget the senseless devastation and bloodshed and revel in the beauty and creative vigour of humanity, then suddenly the guilt strikes with a vengeance; something clutches at your heart; your throat burns with the thirst of thousands in Basra and the image of an old woman in black, scooping up water with a battered tin bowl out of a puddle in the desert gnaws at your brain. Even in Zurich, where I spent the whole of last week assisting the Prohelvetia office in Cairo to explore possibilities for further cultural cooperation between Switzerland and Egypt, the feeling persisted. A tour of the magnificent Theaterhaus Gessnerallee (formerly cavalry stables) ended in a friendly-looking garden with wooden benches and tables and a small refreshments kiosk. My escort was Jean Gradel, the theatre's artistic director, and in the watery sunlight, his kind face looked harried and anxious. After a few desultory remarks we lapsed into embarrassed silence. Talking about theatre, we both felt, was somehow frivolous. Peering pensively into his glass of beer, he stammered something about Iraq and for the next half hour we were deep in conversation about the rights and wrongs of the war. Everyone he knew was feeling depressed, he said, not knowing what to do with the persistent feelings of rage and helplessness. The question was how to preserve one's faith in the usefulness and validity of what one was

* 3.4.4003. In Arabic.

doing in order to carry on doing it. Old palliatives like "the show must go on" sounded hollow and seemed pathetically trite.

Last Saturday, at the Jesuit Cultural Center in Alexandria where I went to see Eva Bergman's Swedish-Egyptian production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, it was a different story. In the open courtyard outside the Garage Theatre you immediately felt a warm sense of human solidarity, of being among people – friends and kindred souls who deeply shared your feelings but were determined not to succumb to despair and keen on giving you solace and the courage to continue. Frére Fayez, that passionate lover of Alexandria and indefatigable promoter of peace, art and culture was there to welcome you, place a gentle, comforting hand on your shoulder. On a plain sheet, signed by all the workers at the Centre and everyone who had anything to do with the project and neatly folded inside the play's programme, you read:

Can We Stop the War?

Yes, we can.
We believe that behind the darkest night
Stands a gleaming and dazzling day.
We believe that within each human being
Lies a wonderful soul, despite all his wrongdoing.
We believe that injustice will not last
And right will prevail.
It is in our power to say no to war and evil
And to struggle to prevent them.
Our fight is not one of weapons, violence and slogans,
But one of peacemakers.
We want to give another meaning to force and might

Through loving, forgiving, opening oneself to others
OUR WEAPONS ARE ART, BEAUTY AND HONESTY.
This is why, today
The Jesuit Cultural Center and all those belonging to it
Plus all the Arab and Swedith artists participating in this
Masterwork of Shakespeare
A Midsummer Night's Dream
Want to proclaim our radical opposition to war and hate
And our will to work for love and peace,
This peace which stems from Man's depths
And finds its source in God himself.
As we present this play tonight, we deeply share
The sorrows and suffering of a defenseless people craving for peace
Hoping that our efforts to promote sincerity in art and culture
Will be able some day to eradicate the roots of evil from people's hearts
May this pave the way to true peace!...

The cynical part of me thought this was highly romantic and pathetically naïve and the feminist in me flinched at the phrase "Man's depths"; but however childish it seemed, this simple declaration of faith was like a fleeting glimpse of long lost innocence and moved me to tears. Inside the theatre, we were asked by brother Fayez to stand up for a minute in silence in memory of the war victims on both sides, and while I was reciting a verse from the Quran under my breath, I found myself wondering how I would respond to the farcical antics of Peter Quince and company. I did not think I could laugh.

Except for a table, a chair and two benches, the stage was empty and painted deep blue all over, merging land, sky and sea, as well as day and night, into one fluid element. No barriers here between dream and reality. At the small table, Sayed Ragab, the author of this new colloquial Arabic version of the *Dream*, pored over his papers in the character of Quince – mock-author and director of the projected "tedious brief scene of young Pyramus / And his love Thisbe". This self parody was a lovely touch which was maintained throughout, at once highlighting the rugged beauty, earthy humour and robust lyricism of this new translation, as well as Ragab's exceptional comic talent as actor. The farcical rehearsal scenes, superbly performed by Khaled El-Sawy, as Bottom, the weaver, Ramadan Khater, as Flute, the bellow mender, Saleh El-Sayed, as Snout, the tinker, and Salah El-Sayeh as Snug, the joiner (Snout the tinker was axed in this version), gained a further comic edge from Ragab's hilarious mimed reactions to the proceedings and his desperate efforts to contain the bubbling energy and enthusiasm of the irrepressible Bottom.

In contrast, the adventures of the quartet of lovers (Aya Soliman as Hermia and Sara Zaghlul as Helena, with Ahmad El-Sayed and Walid Marzouk as Lysander and Demetrius) and of the Lebanese Bernadette Houdeib and the Moroccan Driss Roukhe (who doubled as the Hipopolyta / Theseus and Titania / Oberon duets) steered clear of farce and caricature and were all played in a sombre comic vein which, with the help of their ordinary, contemporary clothing, brought the characters nearer everyday reality and foregrounded their painful bewilderment and sense of confusion as they were sucked into the dream. In the case of Bernadette, Aya and Driss, the transition from rational, urban reality to the nocturnal regions of the unconscious was

managed with admirable smoothness and their performances were uniformly finely shaded and accurately rendered, with sensitive vocal delivery and intelligent manipulation of body language. As in the best productions of the *Night* I have seen, Swedish director Eva Bergman and her Swedish-Egyptian artistic and technical crew (assistant director Ahmed El-Attar, choreographer Tomas Fredriksson, music director Bo Stenhom, set and costume designer Tofte Per Lamberg, light designer Charlie Astrom, sound designer Charlie Schaloske and make-up artist Elisa Efergan, as well as Nifisa Sayed Zaki and Ahmed Qutb) managed to bring to the surface the murky depths and disturbing nuances and associations of this deceptively skittish and lighthearted text.

Instrumental in this respect were the performances of Hassan Kreidli as both Puck and Philostrate, the master of revels as Theseus's court, and Roba El-Shamy as both Hippolyta's attendant and Moth – the only fairy who survived the Bergman-Ragab present version of the play. In leather, baggy trousers, with tousled hair and a bare chest, except for a short, sleeveless, open vest, Kreidli came across as a crazed, deranged, impish teenager, alternately violent, dangerous and obscene. His mime scenes with Roba – Bergman's creation of course – were daringly erotic, with vivid suggestions of malice, threat, sly evasions and secret collusion in mischief, while his habit of arrogantly jerking forward the lower half of his body whenever he spoke to any one was calculatedly vulgar and obscene. He was obviously a creature of the nether world, a spirit of sexual and moral anarchy. On more than one occasion, we caught him on the verge of raping or savaging one of the sleepers, be it Hermia, Titania, or even Lysander, and was only stopped by the timely appearance of Oberon or another character.

The boundless, anarchic sexual energy which characterised the fairy world gained force from the austere simplicity and emptiness of the deep blue surroundings and its intensity was coloured, modulated and, where necessary, tempered down by the powerful and vividly evocative musical score which blended mood pieces with Western pop and Egyptian folk tunes. Indeed, in this production the music, played live on stage, with the six musicians who jointly created it in full view, was of primary importance – a veritable structural element. Each of the six musicians – Ahmed Omran (Oud and flute), Tarik Yamani (keyboard), Mahmoud Refat (drums), Bo Stenholm (bass), Mohamed Gamal, known as Mizo (percussion) and Nur Ashour (saxophone) – as the programme tells us, "contributed his special experience and talent" and, together, "they worked in cooperation with the actors, the choreographger and the director to fine-tune the music and integrate it into the whole performance."

A Midsummer Night's Dream in colloquial Arabic is not a novelty in Egypt and has been done at least four times before. What makes the language in this production so special, apart from its authentic Egyptian imagery and rhythms, is the fact that it incorporated the vocal modulations and characteristics of the Lebanese, Moroccan, Palestinian and Jordanian Arabic dialects. The vocal score of the performance became enriched by this fusion and ordinary words gained in freshness, sounding at once familiar and delightfully strange. Like the music and the highly successful programme of workshops, either related to or built into the work of the production, which, over more than three months, has provided valuable training ground for the Arab cast and technical crew, as well as other young artists, this vocal blending has cultural implications and highlights the aim of this Swedish/Arab

production. As producers Kristina Nelson and Brita Papini say: "The issue of translation is at the heart of any cultural exchange and in this project the translator (Sayed Ragab), the director (Eva Bergman), the dramaturge (Lena Fridell), language assistants and, finally, actors have participated in a linguistic process which is both cultural and creative, all gaining insight into the issues of translating culture." Like Alexandria, Bergman's fascinating *Dream* is multicultural in character, a forum for cross cultural contact, inspired by "the Jesuit's long-standing and worldwide policy of promoting a culture of peace among the different peoples and cultures of the world." As such, it is a statement of faith and a plea for peace – both sorely needed at this moment in history.

Dancing Through Shakespeare:

A Shakespearean collage in body language at Bibliotheca Alexandrina*

Actors have been known to attempt humorous run-throughs of Shakespearean texts in the space of less than an hour. I remember a company in Britain (I forget what it was called – Shakespeare Without Tears perhaps?) which made a specialty of this type of show. In Egypt, such irreverent treatment of the bard is not unknown and director Khalid Galal, in particular, seems to have a penchant for it. In his *Shakespeare One, Two*, he managed to cram as many as three tragedies, *Hamlet*, *Othello* and *Macbeth*, plus *Romeo and Juliet* in a little over two hours and followed it, a couple of years later, with a diminutive *Hamlet*, performed at breakneck speed, then treated us to a hilarious 40-minute version of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* last year. Indeed, *A Midsummer* seems to be generally viewed, especially by young people, as a prime candidate for this kind of approach and keeps surfacing in a variety of adumbrated forms in amateur and university productions.

To enjoy a show of this kind; one assumes, requires foreknowledge of the original text – which, in the case of Egyptian directors who address an audience with a limited knowledge of the bard, necessarily curtails their choice of plays. Unless they are targeting an exclusive audience of Shakespearean specialists, they cannot safely wonder outside the four main tragedies and three or four comedies at

* 27.4.2004. In Arabic

the most – namely *A Midsummer*, *The Merchant of Venice*, *The Taming of the Shrew* and, perhaps, at a pinch, *Twelfth Night.* And even in such cases the audience will mostly recognise basic situations in the plays rather than individual lines. Such adumbrations of the bard come across as clear parodies which invariably teeter on the edge of farce – not surprisingly in view of the galloping rhythm at which the events unfold and the drastically abridged scenes succeed each other. In fact, farce can be a definite asset in such cases, since, unlike parody, it can be relished on its own, without need for prior knowledge of any ulterior text.

Not all Shakespearean adumbrations, however, take the form of reductive parodies which aim for nothing beyond being good entertainment and pure fun. In some cases, Shakespearean texts are sketched in brief outlines into a performance with a view to intertextuality rather than parody. Themes and characters are picked up from one or (rarely) more plays, projected in a new setting, from a different perspective, or in a different emotional key, and used to create works with a serious intent which embody a certain state of mind or existential condition, or to offer a particular reading of history or contemporary reality. In one instance, Mahmoud Abu Doma's *Dance of the Scorpions* which he wrote and directed, a telescoped version of *Hamlet* was projected in grotesque, surreal terms and used to expose the power-politics underlying autocratic regimes and military dictatorships. In another, the same Khalid Galal I mentioned earlier went out of his way to produce a non-parodic, thoroughly serious, almost grim half-hour *Hamlet* which overplayed the element of grotesque to a weird pitch and presented a nightmarish vision of a police-state overrun by terror and infested with delusions.

The most recent non-parody show to draw on Shakespeare for material and inspiration is Karim El-Tonsi's *Shakespeare: An Encounter* at the Bibliotheca Alexnadrina. More adventurous than most, it ropes in characters, scenes and lines from as many as seven plays and, using the bodies and voices of twelve actors – all members of the Actors Studio, the one-year old Bibliotheca Alexandrina resident theatre troupe, juggles them into an intriguing pattern of parallelisms and contrasts.

The initial triple sequence serves as a kind of prelude. The first shows the actors, barely visible in the dim light, locked together on the stage floor in a heaving, swirling, octopus-like mass then disengaging themselves, one by one, to roll away into the wings (a familiar El-Tonsi choreographic item which featured in other shows). In the second, they reappear in white shirts and black trousers and walk in circles round the stage, threading their way through four screens at the back (which provide the only set), with each pausing briefly in turn to introduce themselves by their real names. In the third, the actors suddenly come to a halt and freeze in dramatic poses, in small pools of light, and deliver, first singly then in unison, a variety of familiar snatches from Shakespeare's plays: Hamlet's "To be or not to be" soliloquy, Ophelia's words about beauty and virtue, Lear's invocation of heavenly wrath on his daughters in the storm speech, Brabantio's ominous: "Look to her Moor, if thou hast eyes to see: / She has deceived her father, and may thee," and Macbeth's moral agonizing over the thought of murdering Duncan, to mention only the ones I remember.

Not quite original, this introduction, however, amply demonstrated the vocal competence and physical control and suppleness of the actors (all beginners, with a modest experience in theatre and none in dance)

and their blessed freedom of the usual inhibitions. As the show progressed, other Shakespearean characters and scenes were introduced: lady Macbeth reading her husband's letter; Cleopatra's last speech before she puts the adder to her breast; Ophelia lamenting the mental deterioration of Hamlet; the Merchant of Venice lashing about with a whip in rage; Portia at court lecturing him on the quality of mercy; Antonio and Bassanio comforting or consulting with each other (with a subtle hint at homosexual love); Othello in an agony of jealousy, with Iago at his shoulder, egging him on, then strangling Desdemona; Laertes fighting with Hamlet over Ophelia's grave and, for the first time in an Egyptian Shakespearean collage, the Iago-like villain, Aaron, Timora's slave and lover in *Titus Andronicus*, boasting of his evil deeds and simulating a sexual encounter with his mistress.

I was surprised to find Aaron, a figure from a play virtually unknown in Egypt, among this bunch of familiar characters. The idea of including him must have come from Sarah El-Hawwari during the improvisations out of which the show developed. After intensive training sessions in movement and dance, El-Tonsi started exploring Shakespeare with his actors. Some of them had taken part in Mohamed Abul Su'ood's production of *Titus Andronicus* at the Bibliotheca in May last year: Nirmeen El-Bureedi, who impersonated Ophelia, Desdemona and Lady Macbeth here, had played Lavinia while Sarah El-Hawwari superbly tackled Aaron. It could be Sarah is still under the spell of the villainous dark slave and, therefore, has added him to the dizzying array of Shakespearean parts suggested by her colleagues. As I watched Nirmeen and Sarah smoothly slipping in and out of characters and sensitively interpreting their parts, both vocally and physically, I remembered with profound gratitude Abul Su'ood's

efforts and three months of continuous hard work to initiate them, and others, as performers and launch the Bibliotheca theatre troupe.

El-Tonsi brought to the troupe his talents as gifted dancer, director and choreographer and built on the work of his predecessor, expanding their knowledge of art and culture and their understanding of themselves, honing their acting talents and body language and training them into the art of movement and dance. Judging by *Shakespeare: An Encounter*, he has done a marvellous job. The feelings and states of mind underlying the spoken lines were physically explored in a thorough way during the rehearsals and effectively translated in performance into complex patterns of eloquent, vibrant, non-mimetic movement.

As one watched the characters surfacing, intersecting and disappearing, doubling, mirroring and flowing into each other, the medley of scenes vocally evoked by the actors on the empty stage, like echoes resonating in a dark tunnel, slowly acquired shape and coherence and a pattern began to emerge. The disparate Shakespearean fragments gradually fell in place and seemed to arrange themselves round the themes of love, death and violence – appearing like successive, often simultaneous, variations on them. At the end, you find yourself in possession of a rich Shakespearean tapestry, exquisitely patterned and delicately, dexterously, lovingly executed – a tapestry that makes you glow and should make the Bibliotheca Alexandrina very proud of its Actors Studio company and its second production.

EUROPE



British and Irish

The Art of Healing

Brian Friel's *Faith Healer* at Al-Hanager*

One sultry morning, two weeks ago, I walked into the cool dimness of the friendly Al-Hanager Centre thinking I was simply going to watch a play. Instead, I found myself participating in what amounted to a cathartic ritual.

To have a really good cry in the theatre has become a rare luxury in our modern cynical times. It has also become unabashedly maudlin, if not ridiculous, to speak of the poetry of pain, the ecstasy of grief or the wrenching of the soul. But with Irish drama in general, and Brian Friel's *Faith Healer* in particular, such terms are unavoidable. In this case, detached observation and cool analysis, the stock-in-trade of the critic, fall short of doing justice to the experience of coping with that Irish genius that makes a virtue of abandon.

Abandon, however, does not necessarily entail the loss of artistic control or technical firmness. As we sniffled and rummaged for tissues, we could not help wondering at the musical intricacy of the composition, the contrapuntal juggling of the details from one narrative to another and the suspenseful progression to the shattering denouement. Perhaps our actors were spirits; the faith-healer, his long-suffering wife and, possibly, his impresario were all dead and the whole play was a vigil — a kind of Irish wake. Would that explain its weird impact? That gnawing sense of absence? Of desolation?.

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* 3.8.1993. In English.

Paradoxically, Friel's ironical portrait of the artist as failed or fraudulent faith-healer managed only to convince us of the healing power of art. With a table, a chair and a big banner sporting the name of the healer, and with next to no physical movement or lighting effects, Richard Cave's three actors held us in a trance for two and a half hours without a break. Intimately and passionately, they poured out their hearts to us in turn, each giving us their version of the story and carrying it a little bit forward. It was a masterful lesson in the art of story-telling, an art for which the Irish have a special genius. As we sat there we felt as if we were transported to that deserted fictional church, in the backwoods of Wales, where the faith healer of the play had his one and only success and the solitary confirmation of his powers.

Funnily enough, the inherent theatricality of the form, cunningly chosen by Friel — a form of direct address that bypasses the famous 'willing suspension of disbelief' and acknowledges no fourth wall (the invisible barrier between actors and audience) — strengthened rather than shattered the illusion of the characters' reality. Indeed, at one point, I felt convinced that Amanda Hirotz was about to have a real nervous breakdown and kill herself there and then, and at another I was quite sure that Martin Head would be so overpowered with emotion as not to be able to utter another syllable. They took us all in, and such was the power and conviction of their performance that I am not sure I won't go looking for that little grave of Amanda's still-born baby and say a prayer next time I am in Scotland!

It is very unfortunate that Brian Friel is not known in Egypt. I have seen many an eyebrow go up in baffled question marks at the mention of his name. Synge and Yeats, Shaw and Wilde are sufficiently

familiar, but not a single play by Friel has been rendered into Arabic. The monthly *Cairo Theatre Review* is about to remedy this situation. Still, a play should be experienced in performance and not on the printed page. And to think that such a mesmerising performance has come to Egypt only to be viewed by the participants in the International Association for the Study of Anglo-Irish Literature Conference, plus a few academics and a sprinkling of theatre practitioners, strikes me as daft if not downright sinful.

In the heady atmosphere that usually precedes the Cairo Experimental Theatre Festival, it would have been both sobering and edifying for our young artists and audiences to see Friel's manner of healing and to realise that actors can be wildly experimental without going dumb and that a forceful theatrical presence can be achieved without the silly gimmicks and gymnastics that have bedevilled us for years. They would have seen good, solid, honest-to-God acting — a rare commodity nowadays on the Egyptian, or rather Cairene stage.

Hoda Wasfi, the director and active brain of Al-Hanager Centre realised this; she urged Cave to give another performance the following evening, or any time he chose, for the benefit of the many young artists she has taken under her generous, expansive motherly wings. Lilburn, however, was heading for the Red Sea, and who could blame him. But maybe we shall yet celebrate another visit from Richard Cave's Stage One Group and another masterpiece from Brian Friel's pen. Dr. Wasfi is a very determined lady.

Hyde and Seek

The Empty Space Company's Adaptation of *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*[*]

I do not think I am singular in my deep fascination with doors and windows. Whether open or shut, dimly or brightly lighted, they flirt with one's imagination, whispering tantalizingly of the human dramas that lie behind them. I seem to remember that it was Virginia Woolf who, in a passing remark in one of her books, alerted me to the imaginative power and telltale potential of these functional objects.

It was such an object that formed the centre and gravitational constant of Andrew Holmes's production *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, presented by the Empty Space Theatre Company at Al-Gomhoria theatre last week. The name of the company had prepared us somewhat for the starkly empty stage that gaped at us as we trooped into the lush auditorium. The title of the play also had triggered certain expectations long before the show started. Like Hamlet or Romeo, the names Jekyll and Hyde have become, largely through cinema, part of the popular culture, acquiring denotative value even for people who have never come into direct contact with the eponymous works that immortalized these characters and for whom the name Robert Louis Stevenson may mean nothing. There was an air of excitement and you could feel that people were looking forward to being deliciously frightened.

* 3.10.1995. In English.

Well, it did not turn out to be that simple. Within a very short time the style of the production revealed itself and it was goodbye to any hopes of passive, lazy watching. It was like a game that needed our active participation and imaginative involvement. The story was there, in Robin Brooks's intelligent and concentrated adaptation which stuck faithfully to the novel in theme, outline and verbal texture. But the experience of the production far surpassed the mere following of a good yarn with a Faustian hero. The excitement stemmed mainly from the demands constantly made on our imagination; one had to be alert all the time, constructing the scene, supplying links and details, defining and redefining identities and locations. It was a thrilling, exhilarating effort, and creative in the most satisfying sense. Suddenly the familiar story was not familiar anymore and gained in symbolic power and emotional depth and complexity.

one often forgets how much sophistication and imaginative daring it takes to attain real simplicity. Out of the many details in Stevenson's novel, designer Anna Georgiadou chose one single item: the back door of Dr. Jekyll's laboratory. Exaggeratedly high, forbiddingly grey and weather-beaten, it dominated the whole stage as the one solid, fixed object. Around it the four actors created imaginary doors through mime and as the action was repeated, quite pointedly sometimes, the presence of this visible door, which remained grimly shut throughout, except for the few stunning moments when it revealed Mr. Hyde, grew unbearably sinister and menacing. In one unforgettable scene Mr. Utterson (played by Simon Walter) stands looking fixedly at it in a puzzled, troubled manner. The light dims then brightens and the other three actors (Andrew Wheaton, Adam Fahey and Steph Bramwell) dash around, creating an early morning street scene, then the light dims again

suggesting that Dr. Jekyll's lawyer had spent a whole day trying to puzzle out the mystery of the engimatic door. By the end of the performance, it is no longer a door but a rich and potent metaphor.

Around this visible centre, Andrew Holmes created a series of vivid, haunting images that followed each other at a galloping speed; his material was the bodies and voices of his four excellent actors who provided many of the sound effects that helped the audience's imagination along. For mood and atmosphere, Ron Hollis's sensitive lighting plan and Richard Heacock's original score were invaluable. The accurate costumes, together with the slightly mannered style of acting and the general colour-scheme strongly suggested the Victorian age but without placing the action in any definite realistic time. Indeed, in every detail, one could see that a lot of artistic energy and deep thinking had gone into the making of this show. It is a pity that some members of the audience failed to appreciate it either because of the language barrier or because they failed to accept its difficult terms and enter whole-heartedly and actively into the spirit of the game.

Sour Notes

The Egyptian Premiere of Shaffer's *Amadeus* at El-Tali'a*

Fame, however brief or transient, has the insidious habit of bringing in its wake shoals of avid biographers, chasing after all the scraps and debris left behind. When these are pieced together, what do we get? Fact or fiction? It is one of the paradoxes of literature that the more meticulous and painstakingly researched a biography is, the more it approximates to the integrity and autonomy of fiction. The writing takes over, making sense of the facts, building them into a coherent narrative, and the better the biographer, the more self-sufficient the writing becomes; its validity no longer depends on a referent outside it. This process is also active in autobiographies and its tactics are more easily discernible.

The status of biography as fiction and the ethics involved were the subject of a lively and heated discussion in a recent seminar on English literature at Cambridge. While biographer Michael Holroyd candidly admitted that he had no qualms about using the strategies of fiction in his biographies, though sticking closely to the facts, novelist Margaret Drabble, who has written a life of Arnold Bennett and a biography of the novelist Sir Angus Wilson, confessed that the genre worried her. In connecting the facts, interpretation is unavoidable, and interpretation brings into play one's own personal attitudes and feelings, even unconsciously. One has to question one's writing all the time and also to resist temptation, she said, the temptation of attributing a line to

* 26.1.1996. In Arabic.

somebody because "it is just the kind of thing he could have said." I may not have Drabble's knack for making such fine and subtle moral distinctions, but I certainly would hate to be in the power of a biographer.

In the case of self-confessed fictional works about real people, the ethical question becomes more pressing and worrying; in more cases than not, the fictional character becomes more vividly authentic than the real person, virtually consuming its reality. Reading Peter Shaffer's *Amadeus* some years back, I couldn't help wondering how poor Antonio Salieri, who occupies a small corner of a two-column page in my music encyclopedia, would feel about being dragged onto the boards and canonized the "Patron Saint of Mediocrities"?

Salieri, however, was more fortunate than many; Shaffer did him the honour of recreating him in the image of Lucifer and making him the vehicle for a deeply religious play – albeit in a most original vein. Of the real Salieri, we must withhold judgement; the facts we have of his life and career may suggest something of his feelings about Mozart, but they certainly tell us nothing of his feelings about God. Shaffer's Salieri, however, is a glorious dramatic creation who starts off as a dry, mean-spirited and covetous timeserver, then is borne on the burning waves of jealousy and envy to the heights of rebellion against his "God of Bargains." Gradually, a Malvolio-like figure is transformed into Milton's arch-rebel engaging God in battle over the fate of earthy Mozart. The turning point comes at the end of Act I, when he glares up at God, swearing: "To my last breath, I shall *block* you on earth." To us he says: "What use, after all, is Man, if not to teach God His lessons?"

To present a play like *Amadeus* in our current climate of theatrical decline is quite a feat. But apart from its many technical and artistic challenges, there was the danger of the play being considered blasphemous. Director Ra'fat El-Dweri (himself a playwright) cleverly guarded against this by substituting 'Fate' for 'God' in the defiant passages. He also took the extra precaution of bowdlerizing the text, replacing the taboo words with saucy but passable equivalents. Nevertheless, the Arabic version, by Shawqi Fahim, despite a few inaccuracies, remained refreshingly daring and exhilaratingly shocking in places.

In his choice of actors, El-Dweri also showed great perspicacity. Wisely, he steered clear of stars and big names; he couldn't afford them anyway on his miserably low budget; besides, most of them are busy cooking the Ramadan fare of serials and comedy shows for radio and television. But in opting for, or rather, having to do with talent instead of fame, El-Dweri could always console himself with Salieri's example. Doesn't he say in the penultimate scene: "I was to be bricked up in fame! Embalmed in fame! Buried in fame – but for work I knew to be *absolutely worthless*"?

The actors' work in this Arabic version of *Amadeus* (billed as *The Magic Flute*) was quite impressive. Hassan Abdel- Hamid, a solid actor of long experience, gave a powerful, gripping rendering of Salieri in his usual ascetic and hushed style. Ihab Subhi, a young, promising actor from the free theatre movement, undertook the part of Mozart with sensitive understanding, boyish candour and graceful agility. Mona Hussein, whose part as Constanze was somewhat toned down, sobered up, and shorn of its ironical twist at the end by the director, did her best

with the character and aquitted herself competently. Indeed, she is one of those few young actors who keep improving with every part. Farid Kamal, Adel Saqr and Ra'fat El-Dweri (as Emperor Joseph II, Baron Van Swieten and Count Orsini-Rosenberg) formed a delightful, comic trio which balanced the sombreness of Salieri.

Now, with a superb text (despite the omissions), Mozart's music, a conscientious director and a good cast one shouldn't have anything to complain about. But one has. Contrary to what Aristotle claims in his *Poetics*, '*spectacle*', the visual element in a drama, is not an optional extra. Here, it mars the whole effect. The set, wigs and costumes managed between them to plunge the actors and the audience into a claustrophobic hole of cheap tinsel glitter and vulgar tattiness. The cluttered multiple set representing an opera-house stage on the right of the audience, Mozart's lodging on their left, and Salieri's home facing them, was too bulky for the small hall of El-Tali'a. El-Dweri chose the small hall, as he admits in the printed programme, in the interest of intimacy between audience and performers; but with a set like that, the audience were nearly crowded out of the hall altogether. When designer Hassan Abdel Tawwab had finished putting up his set, there was barely room for two rows of seats. The ambitious set-plan, coupled with a low budget, could only result in general tawdriness. The costumes were shabby enough, but nothing could compete with the horror of the wigs, particularly Mozart's. Made of coarse, cheap yarn, it kept sticking out in places, giving him the look of a crazed man; worse still, it was dyed yellow streaked with red. The idea, as the director told me, was to suggest the fire of genius, but the final impression was more of an

outlandish clown. Poor Subhi had to carry this monstrosity on his head for the most part of the performance.

But even if we could turn a blind eye to the gaudy tinsel frills pinned around the props in garish profusion, and forget about the wigs and the boots, how could we obliterate from our view the clumisly swaying and gawkily gesticulating mass of curves masquarading as Katherina Cavalieri, or those other ungainly rotund figures representing the ladies of the court? What a blessing it is El-Dweri cut out the silent part of Teresa Salieri. We got away with one less embarrassing horror. If we can't get decent extras, we should do without them altogether. Indeed, soon enough we may have to do without state-funded productions altogether.

But by far, the most depressing detail of the *decor* and also the most significant (signifying the abject poverty, criminal negligence and scandlous condition ot our state-run theatres today) was the piano. It crouched in one corner, rickety and dilapidated, chipped and cracked everywhere, a sorry travesty of its former self. The keyboard, with the ivory coat gone or turned brownish yellow, grinned at us mirthlessly like a row of grimy teeth with quite a few missing, leaving dark, gaping holes. On this poor, grotesque object the actors had to pretend to play some of the greatest music of all time. The discrepancy between the recorded music we heard and the spectacle before us was too gross, too horrendous to be reconciled. What a waste of a good text and a lot of good enthusiastic acting; but perhaps it is to be expected within a system that cares little for theatre and even less for music.

Over the Hills and Faraway

Synge's *Playboy of the Western World* at the National*

Irish drama is rarely performed in Egypt. In nearly thirty years of theatre-viewing I can only recall two performances of Synge's *The Shadow of the Glen*, by two different groups of students at the Theatre Institute, as graduation projects, and a production of *Riders to the Sea* at the Chamber Youth Theatre which ran for only a week.

This makes the visit of the Scottish Communicado Theatre Company to Cairo and Alexandria with Synge's *Playboy of the Western World* all the more valuable. One expected it would be generally regarded as an important theatrical event and would draw a wider and more varied audience than it actually did.

Sadly, however, and, quite incomprehensibly, the night I was there the whole experience felt like a 'drama-in-education' exercise. Most of those present were either members of the foreign community in Cairo, or people connected with the promotion of the study of English Literature in Egypt in one capacity or another.

This may seem natural to some, since the show was in a foreign language; to others, the absence of all those young theatre enthusiasts who usually flock to any visiting Shakespearean play, even if it is in Chinese, and who crowd the theatres during the Experimental Theatre Festival, proved somewhat puzzling. The Egyptian critics and reviewers too, and the whole community of theatre artists, were

* 30.3.1996. In English.

prominent by their absence! To the ordinary theatre-goer, Synge may be an unknown quantity, but surely not to this invisible audience.

As the evening wore on an icy air settled on the auditorium. It was through no fault of the performers or the production. Was it then the fault of the audience who had come to perform a function rather than for the joy of theatre? Was it that the Irish dialect in which the actors delivered their lines was too difficult to follow, even by that learned, exclusive audience? Or was it, perhaps (and this may sound sacrilegious), that the text, which had once provoked fierce opposition and active violence, was no longer capable of striking chords in the consciousness of a modern audience?

But, surely Synge's warning against myth-making and hero-worship is still relevant to us today, at least in the developing world. True, many heroic bubbles have been burst, and many idols have fallen; but haven't others taken their place?

What makes Synge's play date is that it optimistically believes that, once raised, false idols can be easily destroyed. Since 1907, when the play was written, history has taught us that the heroes we create soon turn into monsters, generating terror. We make them, but they devour us. Without this knowledge one might sympathise with the rise and fall of the cloddish young Christy and revel in his regeneration. As it is, I can't: Hitler is still too much with us, here and now.

This may seem like foisting a political reading on the play; but then *The Playboy* is ultimately — despite the heightened lyricism, the central love-triangle and the evocative setting — a political satire. At the time of writing Synge could afford, historically speaking, to denounce the people and sympathise with the fallen, false hero; I doubt very much

if any audience can do that now, and if they did, it would be an ominous sign.

Still, Synge's *Playboy* remains a near perfect work in terms of structure, language, characterisation and atmosphere. If one could lay one's political consciousness to rest and forgive, for the space of the performance, the absence of that sense of relevance and immediacy which makes for a vibrant dramatic experience, one could enjoy the play.

In the Communicado Company production, director Gerry Mulgrew, designer Karen Tennent, lighting-designer Jeanine Davies and costume-designer Hilary MacDonald combined their creative forces to provide a fitting setting for the talents of their gifted performers. The set had a significantly lop-sided, grimy, rough-textured, tattered look and seemed to reek of the smell of sweat and the 'stale stink of poteen'. The wooden bench, table and two stools which made up nearly all the movable props were used by the director to choreograph his actors' movement, creating some interesting formations and some hilarious sequences.

The three acts were compressed into two parts and at the beginning of each Mulgrew added an expressionistic scene with song and movement. In the first, the actors, as the villagers, file in, chanting, stand in a row facing us in their long, black gowns and hoods, then leave after hanging a spade (the weapon with which Christy attempts to kill his father twice and which figures prominently in the process of mythologising him) on a wall. In the second, we watch a rowdy mock-funeral, performed by the same black-clad villagers, where the semi-stylised movement of the solemn march and rituals soon breaks

into wild, bacchic revelry. The final scene of the play, too, was sensitively handled by Mulgrew and Jeanine Davies to soften the banality and embarrassing weakness of the last line of the play. As the silly, romantic heroine, Pegeen Mike, is about to declaim: "Oh, my grief, I've lost him surely. I've lost the only Playboy of the Western World", the director quickly frames her against the door at the back of the set and bathes her in translucent lighting, suggesting a fast-fading sunset.

In the area of acting, all acquitted themselves competently, giving fine performances. However, one could have wished for a little more fire and passion from Lesley McGuire as Pegeen Mike and a little less comical charm and meekness in the general air and deportment of Conleth Hill as 'the wonder of the Western World'. The most theatrically convincing and accurate performances came from Franchine Mulrooney as Widow Quin, from Owen Kavanagh as the indestructible Old Mahon (it would take all the spades of the world to kill him) and Michael Berrington as Pegeen's eternally drunk father. This should not be surprising: these are the best-written parts in the play.

The Playboy may not have taken the town by storm as one would have wished, and the Irish dialect may have led some to nickname the company 'Incommunicado'; but the British Council can take comfort in the fact that it has brought us a fine production, by a fine body of actors of a fine — albeit politically out-dated and somewhat puerilely optimistic — text. Throughout the performance, though, I vexedly pondered on the irony that practically all the plays written about peasants never get to be seen by peasants anywhere in the world.

A Buddha in a Junkyard

The Egyptian Premiere of Pinter's *The Caretaker* at the National*

Funny how all tramps look alike whatever their nationality. Pinter's Davies who currently treads the boards of the National's main hall from six to eight every evening is no exception, however much he struts and frets. If you take a ramble through Ataba square at night you will stumble upon his like, lurking in the shadows of the arcade facing the theatre or huddled in the narrow, pitted passage-way that separates it from the ghostly remains of what was once the Azbakkiya Gardens. I can imagine director Mohamed Abdel Hadi running into one of them upon his return to Cairo after many years in Europe and rushing into the old prestigious theatre to announce to its manager, Huda Wasfi, that he has finally hit upon just the right play for his come-back production: Pinter's *The Caretaker.*

Of course, tramps have always fascinated artists, and may be they are, in the final analysis, kindred spirits. Sophocles's Oedipus ended up a tramp, and so did Shakespeare's Lear, and both Chaplin and Beckett have immortalized the figure, the one making him a prototype of modern man and the other a metaphor for the human condition. Pinter's tramp is likewise a poetical metaphor and a brilliantly comic creation; but he is also an intensely real figure, with very real faults, fears and obsessions. He may be the archetypal lost father, Adam, coping with his sons after the fall or Gloster coping with his in *King Lear*, or even a

* 28.11.1996. In Arabic.

Buddha fallen on hard times (as Pinter goes to great lengths to suggest); but above and beyond all this, he is a very convincing life-like character. He is weak, old, helpless and pathetic, but also spiteful, cringing, boastful, mendacious and xenophobic. Out on the streets, in the open air, the natural habitat of all tramps, he would be just another harmless tramp, obsessed with the weather and the need for good shoes to carry him along. But Pinter, who is equally obsessed with rooms (as appears from a conversation with Richard Findlater, published in *The Twentieth Century* in February 1961), and whose first play was significantly called *The Room*, decides to drag him indoors, into the private territory of two brothers: Mick, an aggressive, high-spirited petty businessman who owns a big, derelict house and a van and seems to have resented his father, and Aston, who was once dreamy and loquacious, but has become inarticulate and slow-witted after forcibly undergoing electric-shock treatment with the approval of his mother whom he feels has betrayed him. Once inside, the tramp becomes a potential intruder and usurper, and a potential guest and victim; and the drama is spun out of the tensions and oscillations between these possibilities and the constantly shifting balance of power between the characters.

For Pinter, it is enough to put two or three characters in a room with a few sticks of furniture and start them talking and, *voila*! You have a play; he has no need of plot and no use for intrigue. The action is born out of the tension between the spoken and unspoken, in those gaps of silence and the areas of hesitancy and indeterminacy. It is this, together with the seemingly rambling dialogue, with its inconsequential shifts, abrupt stops and transitions and many disconcerting digressions which make Pinter's plays, despite their naturalistic moorings, so

elusive and so difficult to render effectively on the stage in a different language.

Pinter transposed to a different linguistic medium and culture will inevitably be a different Pinter, and, paradoxically, it is only by acknowledging this fact and acquiescing in it that a translator or director can hope to capture, in a large measure, the authentic mood of the plays, their humour, poetry and emotional complexity. It is useless to try to ape in classical Arabic the subtle rhythms of ordinary English conversation which Pinter capitalizes on and often parodies, or to try to reproduce in the acting style the natural reserve of the British; to feel authentic, both the language and the acting should heed the natural temperament of the native speakers of the language. An earlier successful production of Pinter's *Old Times* at Al-Hanager this year[*] has proved the wisdom of using an educated version of the Egyptian vernacular in the translation; and in the case of the current production of *The Caretaker*, translator Abdel Halim El-Bashlawi steered a middle course between classical and colloquial Arabic and his policy paid high dividends. The actors were at ease with the words and characters and were able to exploit the rich tonal resources of ordinary everyday language. Sami Abdel Halim's Davies was Pinter's tramp all right, but touched up with many vivid local colours; he spoke of going to Sidcup and of the rain that would not let up and was convincing; but you could equally easily imagine him knocking around the maze of alleys that surround Ataba square. To his fidgety, excitable, restless Davies, Kamal Suliman contrasted a gentle, sensitive Aston, shy and lonely; his movement, alternately stiff, jerky and fumbling, was strangely moving,

* See *The Egyptian Theatre: New Directions*, GEBO, Cairo, 2003, pp. 207-10 (by the same author).

betraying a depth of sorrow under the cool, subdued surface. Zein Nassar as the aggressive Mick opted for a loud, violent, openly theatrical style of acting which, at its most frenzied, suggested a somewhat deranged character with hallucinations of grandeur. In a British production, this style would seem overdone and would perhaps shatter the fabric of the play; I am not even sure that this interpretation of the part tallies with what Pinter had in mind. Egyptian productions, however, are made of tougher fabrics, and the current production sustained the violent gymnastics of Nassar without breaking. Hopefully, in time, he will tone down his lurid performance to make it more harmonious with the performances of the two other members of the trio.

On the whole, the production stuck faithfully to the text and designer Mohamed Hashim allowed himself, as far as possible, to be guided by Pinter's stage-directions regarding the set and costumes. The set was duly cluttered with old junk, as Pinter instructed, but the statue of Buddha was enlarged and placed on a high shelf at the top, with a constant spotlight on it, obviously for the benefit of the unperceptive members of the audience, and the walls of the room were made to look as if they were made of thin planks of wood, with obvious cracks in between through which the light seeps from outside. This made the room look curiously like Aston's intended shed, which he dreams of building, and had the effect of permeating the whole scene with a sense of pathetic fragility. In comparison, the big, white statue of Buddha, hitched up high, looked solidly god-like and immovable, intimating permanence and serenity. This suggests a different interpretation of the meaning of the statue, particularly since the director omits the highly

significant moment near the close of the play when Mick hurls the statue at the tramp and breaks it as a sign of the final rejection of the father-figure. In the production, the rejection remains verbal in the case of the two brothers.

In the interest of brevity, Abdel Hadi divided the play into two parts instead of three acts, ending the first part after Aston's proposal to Davies that he stay on and become caretaker. Consequently, the second part opens with the second brother, Mick, making the same proposition to the same person which serves to highlight the symmetrical structure of the play, with its parallels and contrasts, and to underline the need of both sons for a caretaker. It is also to Abdel Hadi's credit that he kept Pinter's quiet inconclusive ending even though it caused some frustration and bewildered dissatisfaction among the audience. In the absence of a curtain many took the final blackout for a scene shift and did not believe the play had ended. Only the appearance of the actors to take their bows convinced them. I left the theatre thoroughly satisfied but I could not understand why I suddenly remembered the old nursery rhyme "It's raining, it's pouring, the old man's snoring" nor why I kept looking around me for tramps.

Well Worth the Wait

A new AUC production of Beckett's *Waiting for Godot**

Lately I have been dogged by the ghost of Beckett and his flock of fictional characters. In Edinburgh, last month, at a small, nondescript hall off the beaten track (I had been lured there by the prospect of watching what was billed as a hilarious one-man show) I found that the "one man" for whose sake I had taken so much trouble was none other than the tediously loquacious Mr. Krapp, under a pseudonym here, but still embroiled, after nearly forty years (the play was written in 1958) in his endless coils of taped inane solipsistic "krapp". The performance was as depressingly bleak and arid as the world view projected in the text.

Back in Cairo, I was treated, in the course of CIFET, to more Beckett in the form of two lifeless productions of *Happy Days* from Argentina and *Waiting for Godot* from Venezuela. Both left me cold and bored and made the plays feel dated. They had only one virtue — that of familiarity, and we all know what that breeds. On both occasions I found myself thinking that Beckett's work has finally, perhaps, outlived its theatrical viability and exhausted all possible interpretations — political, historical, philosophical or metaphysical. Gone are the days when the antics of Vladimir or Estragon had the shock of novelty or could inspire wild enthusiasm or obstreperous anger. Sadly, the daring experiments of yesterday make the hallowed conventions of

* 2.10.1997. In English.

tomorrow. In a perceptive essay Roland Barthes once described the process of taming the avant-garde and assimilating it into the mainstream ideology. Among others, he cited Beckett as an example and, indeed, one wonders if it ever occurred to Beckett when he wrote his first play after the war that in a few years time his cynical and embittered appraisal of the human condition would become an institutionalised, commercially lucrative commodity exported the world over.

The problem with Beckett's plays seems to me to lie in the voluminous mass of critical writing that has built up around them over the years and solidified into an almost impenetrable, lethal crust. They have been taken far, far too seriously, treated as philosophical treatises rather than plays, and in the morass of this "critical mass" of explication and interpretation, their life giving roots in the music hall, circus and silent movies have got submerged. My first exposure to a Beckett play, *Endgame*, back in the sixties, was an unforgettable experience simply because, while the proceedings on stage called for laughter, all those around me sat grimly attentive, hanging upon the actors' every word as if expecting some epiphany to emerge or the meaning of life to be suddenly fathomed. The tradition seems to have persisted: as late as 1993 I saw a student production of *Waiting for Godot* at the Theatre Institute where the students trod the boards, glowering portentously at the audience and glaring balefully at one another. At the end, they rushed down stage, startling the audience with the mysterious cry "Man is Man", which happens to be the title of one of Brecht's more famous plays. They had presumably found Beckett's play too weak and negative and decided to inject it with a good dose of robust Brechtian socialism.

Few artists, in my experience, have been able to approach Beckett's plays with the theatrical zest they deserve and, indeed, require. Tori Haring-Smith's current production of *Waiting for Godot* for the AUC Theatre Company at the Wallace is one of the funniest, most refreshing and enjoyable I have seen of the play. The secret lies in a healthy disregard for philosophical pretensions, an honest admission that by now the message of the play has become all too clear, an unselfish reluctance to impose a point of view or to nudge the viewer into reading "symbols where none intended"; but, above all, it lies in Tori Haring-Smith frank, whole-hearted and exultant embracing of the artificiality, that is, the built-in theatricality of the play.

I could hardly recognise the Wallace when I stepped into it. It had been dismantled and restructured to create an intimate theatre in the round with an exciting sloping performance area. The audience sat on all sides, at various levels, and the effect of this fan-shaped, uneven seating arrangement was to create for the audience the illusion of being precariously balanced on the tip of a precipice and about to fall in. The sense of danger, albeit illusory, accentuated the feeling of intimacy and partnership in the game particularly when the actors dashed among the audience trying to hide or escape. But the only escape route, a side door that leads out of the theatre altogether, had been intelligently placed in the new spatial structure at the very bottom of the slope. Thus, quitting the theatre became the equivalent (for the duration of the performance) to quitting life, and the Wallace became a physical, concrete metaphor of the world. Occupying the centre of this vivid metaphor was the familiar lonely tree, here pathetically exposed on all sides, providing no hiding place. To enhance the theatricality, both the lighting and the acting had a charming simplicity and a studied child-like feel which

contrasted beautifully with the make-up of the performers and their costumes. The actors (Tarek El-Etrebi, Karim Mansour, Sherif Bishay, Mohamed Abu Rayya and Sayo Yushioka) were not only competent, but brought to their parts an infectious energy. They, with their director and her crew, managed to reconcile me to Beckett. With them, waiting for Godot was an immense pleasure.

Great Art and Brave Hearts

Out of Joint play Caryl Churchill's *Heart's Desire* and *Blue Kettle* at the National*

The brutal Luxor massacre had cast a pall on the whole country; the general mood was one of horror, anger, disgust and deep revulsion. The reception held on Tuesday 18 November by the British Council to welcome the Out of Joint Group was sombre and subdued; the British government had already issued its official warning for Britons to stay away from Egypt and, despite the presence of Max Stafford-Clark (the founder and artistic director of Out of Joint and director of the guest production), his determination that the visit should take place as planned, and the frantic contacts and consultations between Cairo and London, no one really believed the actors would turn up. The first performance (scheduled for Wednesday 19 November) had already been cancelled, we were told, and a generous supply of good wine was provided to help us swallow our disappointment. But the following day, just as we were getting resigned to the dismal prospect of a dull, gloomy weekend, they all arrived. It was a wonderful gesture of friendship and support, and I do hope they realise how much it has meant to all of us Egyptians, and not just to theatre artists and lovers, and how deeply it has touched us.

On the morning of Thursday 20 November, Max did his workshop as planned and, though it lasted only three and a half hours (he had to rehearse his actors for their first performance that evening), it was

* 27.11.1997. In English.

invaluable in terms of the inspiring insights it gave us into his understanding of theatre and method of work. Cultivating the power of intuition, grasping the effect of the cultural context on any process of theatrical signification, understanding the influence of the hierarchies of power on feeling, behaviour and social and personal relationships, and ensemble acting were the focal points. The part concerning cultural differences in particular occasioned great hilarity. The participants included ten Egyptians, mostly young performers and directors, two British actresses (Jacqueline Defferary and Karina Fernandez), and a brilliant AUC team made up of playwright Tom Coash, director Tori Haring-Smith, actress and director Krista Scott (well into her pregnancy but very agile) and director Eric Grischkat. This made it possible to view modes of expression from different cultural angles and compare notes about different responses to familiar situations. By the end of the workshop Max had won a permanent place in everybody's affection and we had gained a deeper appreciation not just of his great talent and commitment, but also of the breadth and richness of his humanity.

The stunning performance we watched that evening revealed another side of Max: the ruthless task-master. The first play in this double-bill (*Blue Heart*, the title under which the evening was billed, is an amalgam of *Heart's Desire* and *Blue Kettle*, the titles of the two plays) qualifies as an actor's worst nightmare. The action, which features an elderly trio (a sour-faced, bullying father, a brisk and sullen mother and a vague, kindly aunt) waiting, with the permanently drunken son of the family occasionally popping in, for a long-absent daughter to arrive from Australia on her first visit home, follows a lurid course and seems, like the 'platypus' referred to by Aunt Maisie at the very beginning, to represent "a completely separate branch of (dramatic)

evolution." Not only does it constantly swing from domestic realism (or a parody of it) to absurdity, it also keeps stopping, rewinding and restarting from different antecedent points, each time taking a wildly unexpected direction, and is punctuated with disconcertingly bizarre intrusions. The replays, moreover, are not simple repetitions: sometimes they are played in a kind of shorthand, at double speed, with only the first or last words of each character's lines repeated with the exact same movements that went with them before and the same intonation.

To take on a work like this which demands, if it is to work at all, absolute precision and split-second timing is a feat of theatrical daring that only a person in full command of his craft and fully confident of his actors' technical virtuosity and artistic discipline is capable of. It also requires a lot of faith — not just in the text or the author, but, ultimately, in the power of theatre to keep rediscovering its magic and infinite potential and, in the process, rediscover the world and reinvent reality.

It may seem like a paradox that a director who names Stanislavsky as the major influence on his work should team up with a playwright famous for her imaginative bravura, experimental spirit and technical innovations. But, then, Stafford-Clark's understanding of realism takes it beyond the mere photographic reproduction of what is commonly perceived as reality to explore the vague, hidden truths that lie under the surface and the inner lining of the heart. What he ultimately seeks to communicate is not what the world is like but, rather, how it feels on the pulse. An identical drive informs Churchill's ceaseless experimentation with form, and this explains their long collaboration.

Very early in her career, she seemed to have discovered that in life, as in the theatre, what is called reality is a convenient fiction — an artificial construct which relies on some hallowed conventions. To disrupt them and subvert the images they support is one way to discover the truth of experience and capture it in fresh images; and it has been Churchill's way. Truth, if it exists at all, is to be sought in what we feel and imagine from moment to moment, and, as such, it is sadly transient. Even memory fails us, or, at best, keeps reconstructing or reshaping the past under the pressure of the present. The only certain realities vouchsafed us, as *Blue Heart* makes clear in its title and two interlocked texts, are those of birth and death, or, as Maisie puts it in *Heart's Desire*, "waiting for arrivals and also waiting to say goodbye".

The waiting in between, like the family's waiting for the daughter whom the father calls their "heart's desire", is filled with false stops and starts, longings and regrets, fears and fantasies, unhappiness, loss and attempts at substitution until the last and final stop. The horrendous irony, of course, is that we never consciously experience either life or death. After rehearsing the idea of death (which literally permeates the first play and carries over into the second) in various versions in *Heart's Desire* (a corpse found in the garden, the news of a tube accident in which the daughter is presumably killed, the gunning down of the father, mother and aunt by masked terrorists, the threat of arrest and liquidation in the figure of a Gestapo officer, Brian's wish that his alcoholic son Lewis had died at birth and his obsessive desire or "terrible urge to eat" himself), Churchill allows Maisie to speak about it directly. She describes the fear of it which she experiences "in the night" as "a chill in [her] blood", calls it "not a problem theoretically" but "the condition of life", then reveals the painful irony inherent in this

"condition": "I think we just stop," she says. "I think either we are alive or we know nothing so death never really happens to us."

Churchill's choice of Maisie as a vehicle for this poignant revelation is not haphazard. Not only is she the nicest character in the play, but also the most sensitive and a bit of an artist with a vivid, lively imagination. She is the one who perceives the pain of waiting, longs in song for "the wings of a dove", is interested in nature and displays a child's curiosity and sense of wonder when she speaks of the duck-billed platypus, her "favourite animal". She does not reel off scientific facts (indeed, she is very hazy and uncertain in this area); instead, her imagination gets to work and tries to paint in words this curious, intriguing creature. She asks us to "imagine going to feed the ducks and there is something that is not a duck, and nor is it a water-rat or a mole, ... imagine this furry creature with its ducky face, it makes you think what else could have existed, tigers with trunks ...".

Maisie's imagination which delights in combining strange and disparate elements and setting them in familiar scenes is not unlike Churchill's, and her platypus on a duck-pond is a variation on Churchill's ten-foot tall bird which suddenly makes its way, unannounced, into a very ordinary, solidly real kitchen. Indeed, one can convincingly argue that the whole action of *Heart's Desire* takes place in Maisie's mind. Her imagination (obviously nurtured on nature books, children's games and fairytales, science and detective fiction, and screen melodramas about gangsters and Nazis, and fired by the daily news reports of acts of terrorism and senseless violence all over the world) rambles freely, mixing bits of fact with lots of fiction and reenacting on the stage of the mind hidden fears and suspicions and

many fantasies. Like a child's, the artist's imagination does not acknowledge the rational view of reality with its linear time, rigid spatial organisation, and its meticulous segmentation of experience into carefully labelled departments. Like Churchill, Maisie has this gift, and it helps both to accept the condition of life and tolerate the waiting.

In the production, Valerie Lilley, Mary Macleod and Bernard Gallagher gave brilliant performances as the elderly trio, spicing the naturalism of the acting with carefully measured dashes of parody, farce and melodrama. In their hands, every ounce of comedy was squeezed out of the hilarious stop-and-start structure without losing any of the play's darker shadows. While rocking with laughter we were treated to sudden and deeply disturbing fitful glimpses of the bleak dark void under the dazzling surface. Julian McGowan's set and costumes and Johanna Town's lighting not only provided the exactly right frame, but were also eloquent visual signs. One look at that forbiddingly cold grey and white kitchen was enough to explain why the daughter took off to distant, colourful Australia and why the son sought refuge in alcohol. The mother was austerely dressed in black and white while the father's clothes were of the same drab grey and white of the kitchen. The only colours to be found were significantly in Maisie's costume — a pinkish-beige trouser suit and a white blouse with red flowers — and those of the three young people in the play (particularly the Australian friend who unlike the daughter and the son does not belong to the reality represented by the kitchen). Another beautifully subtle visual sign was the small pot of colourful flowers which Maisie constantly brings to the table.

In the second play, *Blue Kettle*, the two words of the title spread like a virus through the play, infecting the language, eating up words and taking their place, until the language completely breaks down and is reduced to a painful jumble of letters from the two words, wrenched out of their proper order and randomly strung. The break-down of language seems inevitable given the abuse it suffers at the principal character's hands. Derek uses language to con elderly women who once gave up a son for adoption into believing that he is that son. His motive seems purely mercenary at first and he admits as much. But after he has collected five false mothers, we realise that there is more to it than simple greed. Derek's mother, to whom he is deeply attached, has become senile and is dying in a geriatric ward. He cannot face the prospect of losing her and to provide against it, he frantically and compulsively collects substitute mothers of different ages, ranging from late 50s to 80, so that if one dies, he will still have plenty left! His need is quite genuine and is movingly expressed in the one scene we see him with his real mother where they recall details of his happy childhood, his golden curly hair when he was three, how it got dark when he was ten, his passion for buses and golden syrup, and how they had both liked Enid Blyton and enjoyed her stories. Derek had particularly "liked the one where there was a tree and every blue (read time) you climbed up it there was a different country."

Though forty, Derek is emotionally still a boy with acute feelings of insecurity. He dreads his mother leaving him, begs his girlfriend Enid not to leave him, and experiences his freedom only through fiction and, indeed, as a fiction. But the fiction does not hold out for long, and, like language, rapidly crumples. I cannot help feeling that there is a hidden message here, that Churchill is partly speaking about the power of the

imagination and its abuse, and using Derek as a dramatic metaphor for the artist of "bad faith" who must inevitably dry up. Rather than the breakdown of language mirroring a breakdown in human communication, as some critics have claimed, in fact, the more language disintegrates in Derek's world, the closer he moves in the direction of the truth until be finally achieves a kind of personal liberation and a moment of genuine human communication and true compassion.

A text of this kind which, like a poem, is shaped and held together by echoes, correspondences and variations on a central image or theme inevitably yields many readings and interpretations. But however much the readings may clash, the emotional power and deep sadness of *Blue Kettle* will continue to move audiences at a deeper level than words can reach. And once more, as in *Heart's Desire*, the acting here was finely paced and tuned and exquisitely nuanced while the spare, yet richly inspired set and lighting created mood and atmosphere and constructed a series of haunting images that together built a poetic visual metaphor for Derek's unreal world — a world of shadows and silhouettes.

Heart's Desire and *Blue Kettle* can be enjoyed separately, but they gain in meaning and impact when watched together, especially in this production. They have obvious thematic and technical links (particularly the themes of separation and reunion, substitution, the technique of repetition with variation, and the deliberate distortion of language), but Stafford-Clark and his crew of designers create other through sound and image. The most significant of these is keeping in the second play the grey walls and floor of the kitchen set in the first and projecting through them, in silhouette, images suggesting various places, both

private and public. It was quite disorienting, like being inside a place and outside it at the same time, and seemed to locate the world of Derek inside the imaginary world of Maisie and make it part of her thoughts. Moreover, the hateful reality represented by the naturalistic kitchen did not seem to give way to a broader and freer one as we stepped outside it into the other play but reproduced itself in a darker, hazier, equally unreal and infinitely sadder version. Curiously, the more profoundly disturbed I became, the more deeply I enjoyed the show. I went away from the theatre thinking that however much great art dwells on sorrow and despair, it always ends up as a vigorous confirmation of life and a source of invigorating joy. Only the scene in which the family was gunned down by terrorists or gangsters in the first play soured my joy for a while.

After the Fact

A new AUC production of Pinter's *Betrayal* at the Wallace*

Imagine how excruciating it would be if you were given the chance to live your life all over again, with all the benefits of hindsight, but without being allowed to change any of its details. It is precisely this kind of proposition that Pinter's *Betrayal* attempts to explore through its inventive and disorienting manipulation of time. Like many plays and novels, it begins at the end, but rather than opt for the traditional flash-back technique which carries you back to the starting point then proceeds, in a circular manner, to narrate the events that led to the end in their proper, chronological order, *Betrayal* adopts a structural policy of gradual retrogression which carries the viewer backwards, in measured, calculated steps to the beginning. Moreover, at every step, or temporal pause in the backward march, Pinter creates a cynically ironical illusion of 'a present' capable of moving into 'a future' by moving the action a few hours, a couple of days, or a week forward before his next time-leap backwards.

This quirky temporal ordering of the events of the story – if one can call it that – may strike one at first as the kind of structural gimmickry used by some authors to inject new life in old, hackneyed themes and formulas, such as adultery and the prodigiously tiresome *menage a trois*. But, in actual fact, that is, in the actual experience of the play in performance, Pinter's curious temporal arrangement here has a

* 26.2.1998. In English.

shattering impact. It can best be described as a relentless process of ruthless displacement and fragmentation that calls into question the reality of memory and experience. Whereas the traditional 'flash-back' invariably adopts, as a functional prerequisite, a single point of view and one perspective, Pinter's curious reworking of it in *Betrayal* consistently splits up the narrative among its three protagonists so that you are never sure at any one point who is remembering what. As the narrative keeps jumping backwards and forwards, projecting scenes that emotionally undercut each other with horrendous irony and cruel cynicism, the reality of the characters and their story gains in ambiguity and, strangely, in pathos.

At the end of the play, you are left with the uncanny feeling that you have been rifling through an old collection of faded, family photographs which aroused vague memories of distant, disturbing scenes, never fully understood at the time, and still edged with mystery now. The cool, elegant and polished surface of the play is not unlike that of an old family photograph; but what of all the tensions, shadows and violence that lurk underneath? They are all there, but half-glimpsed, dimly hinted at, and it is up to you alone to try to uncover and make sense of them. You should not look to the characters for any help; none will be forthcoming. Each will fitfully break through the glossy surface of the photo and try to make you view the others from his or her standpoint. But the final story – the real one behind the pale, skeletal triangle – will be one of your own making. Who is Emma and who is Robert? And why, five years after their marriage (why did they marry?) Emma could not resist, and easily succumbed, to the drunken (and quite ridiculous) solicitations of Jerry, her husband's best friend, and best man at their wedding? And what about Jerry? What can you make of

him? Is he a neglected husband? A frustrated potential creative artist turned critic? or simply an easygoing, happy-go-lucky person who wants to give and receive pleasure without bothering his head about the causes and consequences? Who is this Casey, the successful novelist who haunts the play, and who, as it is pointedly hinted, is to succeed Jerry as Emma's lover? Caught between a husband who is a publisher and a lover who is a critic and a talent-scout, did Emma finally opt for the creative (physically absent but very much dialogically present) Mr. Casey as the thesis of both antitheses?

As you watch the play, questions keep erupting, quite disconcertingly, and a great deal of the pleasure, and much of the sense of the story, are born out of the actors' attempts to grapple with them and put across their tentative answers convincingly. It is the kind of text that is bound to make different sense every time it is performed. I remember seeing it some years ago in a production by the Maadi Players (a suburban amateur group which combines foreigners and Egyptians) and the impression I got of it then was vastly different from the one I got from Eric Grischkat's interpretation. In his version, Emma, sensitively and subtly rendered by Noha Farouk, and framed in Timaree McCormick's fascinating multiple set (curiously and teasingly reminiscent of Escher's lithographs and woodcuts), as an intensely vulnerable and sympathetic person, pathetically honest, deeply confused, and much sinned against than sinning.

The fact that the two Bishay brothers (Sherif as Jerry, and Karim as Robert) seemed, perhaps because they are brothers, to have a kind of natural, invincible bond, made Emma's situation in this production all the more poignant. She seemed desperately caught between Karim's

maddening lassitude and nascent homosexuality and Sherif's ruthless childishness and blithe nonchalance. Despite the glossy surface and brilliant wit of the dialogue, this talented trio managed to lace the words with a subtle sense of tragedy and to communicate a feeling of icy desolation.

She Walks in Beauty

The Egyptian premiere of Peter Shaffer's *Lettice and Lovage* at Al-Hanager*

The original stage version of Peter Shaffer's *Lettice and Lovage*, presented at the Theatre Royal Bath then at the Globe Theatre in 1987, ends with the two heroines – the wildly romantic, whimsical and overflowing, but poignantly vulnerable Lettice Douffet, and the practical, superficially cold and austere, but intensely passionate Lotte Schoen – conspiring to blow up all the buildings they dislike with a medieval weapon. In the printed version, however, this fantastic ending which, though it caused a lot of mirth in performance, dismissed the play "into improbability" – as Shaffer himself puts it – was altered. Instead, the two ladies – one with experience in the theatre which qualified her as the "most dramatic guide" to historical buildings ever, and the other with long architectural experience and many connections in the tours and travel agencies business – decide to quit working for the British Preservation Trust or any other company and set up their own firm.

Their original E.N.D. (Eyesore Negation Detachment) Tours Ltd. they decide, will be "dedicated to showing people the fifty ugliest new buildings in London," as Lotte says. As she guides her clients round the chosen architectural horrors and monstrosities, Miss Douffet, on the other hand, will deliver her "Devastating Denunciation of Modern Design" and "show how beauty has been murdered – and by whom.

* 14.2.2002. In Arabic.

Exactly which architects, builders, engineers and city planners." This new ending seemed to Shaffer "both correct and pleasing", and also, "in our lunatic world, entirely credible." Shaffer winds up his preface to the printed text with a hope "to see a variant of E.N.D. Tours Ltd. advertised in *The Sunday Times* any day now." But since 1988, when those words were written, no such variant has materialised either in London or any other metropolis. But who knows? May be we shall soon see one in Cairo; with so many disgusting buildings sprouting up every minute and so many disgruntled people, it can prove an extremely lucrative business. The irony is, that the business sharks who have unconscionably defiled the face of this old and once beautiful city will most probably be the ones running any such company and licking their lips at the prospect of making yet more money out their architectural crimes.

Infected with a similar indignation at the criminal architectural obscenities surrounding him and the unbridled devastation of beauty on a daily basis, particularly in the 1970s, Shawqi Fahim rendered Shaffer's play into Arabic the year it was published by way of protest and relief. (He had already given us a beautiful translation of Shaffer's *Equus* a few years earlier.) Curiously, however, no producer or director realized at the time its urgent topical interest or deemed it relevant in any political way to our everyday Egyptian reality. Defending the beauty of one's own city was not considered an important enough issue; the many references to British history in the text, it was thought, would alienate and puzzle the audience, and its brand of humour, subtle, witty, polished and elegant, was regarded as too tame. What is more, there was no love story, no romantic interest, and to make matters worse, both heroines were middle aged.

It was not until last month, that this lucid, accurate, intelligent and highly actable translation found its way to the Egyptian stage, and, as is usual in such cases, the venue was the adventurous Al-Hanager. The production was neat and lively, with veteran actress Nagat Ali as Lotte, the youthful, bubbling Hanan Soliman as Lettice, and the exuberant Maher Selim as Mr. Bardolph, the lawyer. Director Emil Shawqi, however, cut the play rather severely, which is a great pity. Yet, no amount of cutting could reduce the thrilling suspense of the sudden twist in the plot at the beginning of act three, or substantially reduce the charm and magic of Shaffer's two heroines, particularly his Lettice.

She is one of the most loveable characters I have ever encountered in drama. Her fervent passion for theatre, for dressing up reality, including history and herself, in imaginary fabrications to make it more beautiful than it really is, her willingness to let fantasy "flood in where fact leaves a vacuum", her pathetic but valiant clinging to an elegant way of life fast fading, and her ardent and obstinate belief that one's aim in life should be to "Enlarge! Enliven! Enlighten!" (the three E's, as her mother, an actress who toured the French countryside with her all-female company, acting Shakespeare's histories in her own French translations and winning the applause of French peasants with her performances of Richard III and Falstaff, called them) have completely enthralled me ever since I met her on the page. Defenseless, ineffectual and haywire as she may seem – one of the failures of this world – for me, she has become a lovely, invigorating presence, a source of courage and inspiration. Invoking the spirit of both Shakespeare and Dickens, a combination as heady as her 'Quaff' (the Elizabethan brew

she has unearthed which acts like a love potion on the ossified Lotte, liberating and humanizing her, and releasing her hidden energies), she is simply unforgettable.

In taking on Lettice, Hanan Soliman faced a tremendous challenge; but depsite her youth, she managed to capture and transmit something of the character's magic and riveting charm. She was of course lucky to have an experienced actress like Nagat Ali beside her. And though the difference in age between the two actresses invested the relationship with a shade of motherly affection, the sense of warm friendship between two women was strongly present and burst to the surface with exhilarating hilarity in act two, under the influence of Lettice's inimitable 'Quaff'. And if you want to try it, watch the play, or read the recipe in the printed text. You will never regret it.

French

Sparkling Cyanide

Marivaux's *La Fausse Suivante* (The False Maid) at the Opera House*

Do you know the cartoon about the hapless middle class couple who went shopping for a painting and strayed into a modern art gallery? Dazed and bewildered at the end of their tour, they protested gingerly to the over-bearing assistant: "But we don't want a penetrating comment on the utter futility of the human condition. We want a pretty picture to hang in our living room."

I wonder what this couple would make of Marivaux's *La Fausse Suivante* as presented by the Comédie Française in the main hall of the Opera House last week? Or, worse still, of the company's 1992 production of Goldoni's *La Serva Amorosa* (The Amorous Maid)? In both cases the director was the ingenious Jacques Lassalle and anyone unfamiliar with his work, particularly in recent years, must have found them somewhat odd and unsettling.

I remember how deeply disturbed I was by the heavy sombreness which enveloped the Goldoni play when I watched it at La Salle Richelieu in December 1993; Catherine Hiegel's portrayal of the title character, Caroline, the maid-cum-fairy godmother of the piece, was relentlessly naturalistic and thickly shadowed with hints of the tragic. Behind the familiar trappings of the *Commedia dell'arte* — the traditional characters, stock situations and intrigues — one glimpsed a shattering intensity of passion and startling depths of pain. At one

* 27.1.1994. In French.

devastating moment, having lightly dismissed the sexual advances of her young master for whom she entertains an ambivalent passion, motherly and sexual at once, Hiegel suddenly bent forward, hugging her sides and uttered a long, eerie howl like a wounded animal. It was quite blood-curdling and seemed to reverberate throughout the production, lending it an air of desolation particularly as Rudy Sabounghi's initially heavy and muted sets began to thin out, leaving the stage frequently looking dark and hollow. No wonder the lovable Arlequin, an aboriginal inhabitant of Goldoni-land, looked quite lost, ill at ease and out of place whenever he strolled on. Goldoni's relatively stable 18th century had given way in Lassalle's production to the dismal realities and social turbulence of the 19th and comedy had crossed over into the realm of *le drame noir*.

Having watched Goldoni's *Amorous Maid* gutted out and its psychological underwiring ruthlessly bared, I felt quite prepared for any surprises M. Lassalle might choose to spring on us when he turned his attention to Marivaux's *False Maid*. But I must admit that this time too I experienced the pleasure, rare in the theatre nowadays, of being thoroughly bowled over and having my most tentative expectations refreshingly thrown out of the window.

Once more Lassale's unswerving conviction that "we are arrant knaves, all" informs the directorial conception and design; and yet the general mood is never savage or cynical; the rigourous judgement is softened at every breath by an air of tender sorrow, compassionate tolerance and stoical resignation. Underlying Lassalle's recognition of the cupidity of men (and women), their vanity, egotism, brutality and fickleness is an obsessive awareness of the transience of life and of the

world as a stage. Like Marivaux's heroine — the young heiress who stages her dangerous strategem disguised as a *chevalier* to find out the truth about her betrothed — Lassalle uses the tools of theatre to cut through the play's surface intrigue in search of a deeper truth. In both cases, the quest yields a bitter insight: when all the masks, the costumes, the scenery and props are stripped off, the reality revealed is a frightening void.

In the case of the heroine, her double disguise, as chevalier and as a Parisian maid masquerading as a chevalier, does not lead her from innocence to experience as Marivaux perhaps intended or as the ambiguous printed end of the play might suggest. In Lassalle's interpretation, it leads her to moral nihilism. She may declare to Lelio at the end as she renounces her disguise that he can now see the real face of his betrothed; but the announcement sounds tragically ironical: the real face of the ardent young girl who travelled from Paris in disguise and had, as she movingly declares early on in Act One, "treasures of feeling to bestow" has been completely lost; the mask had eaten into the real face, making it into another mask to disguise a new uglier reality.

But even before the end, indeed, as early as scene eight in Act One, we get clear intimations of this tragic process of transformation; from that scene on, a note of hysterical despair begins to creep into Muriel Mayette's voice (as the chevalier) and becomes increasingly audible. Her movement and gestures, too, become progressively strained, tense and jerky. The feeling of pent up, frenzied hysteria reaches a sinister pitch in her last love scene with the countess (performed superbly by Catherine Salviat not as a coquette but as a dazed and befuddled, innocent and doomed victim).

Lassalle's particular reading of Marivaux's text found its most eloquent visual equivalent in Rudy Sabounghi's complex stage set with its distinct twin spaces, richly evocative contrasts and multiple screens. The seemingly solid and grimly imposing black façade of the chateau which faces us at the beginning is flanked on both sides by two huge metal portals and the whole structure (with a tap visible on one side and a lamp-post on the other suggesting the four elements and bringing into play their many associations) is set a little way back from the proscenium arch which enframes it suggesting yet another imaginary barrier. We end up with three imaginary boxes, one inside the other.

The few scenes which take place in that dimly lighted area at the beginning provide the essential facts of the situation, set the plot rolling and introduce disguise as both a theatrical device and a rich thematic vein. More importantly, however, we are taught early on to distrust our perceptions and the conclusions about reality we base upon them. The identities of place and time here are deliberately confused: while the scene and lighting in front of the façade suggest a place out of doors at night, we fitfully glimpse behind it, through a small door, a garden in broad daylight! The confusion of appearance and relaity is maintained throughout and forebodings of its tragic workings are insistently sounded in Jean-Charles Capon's eerily suspenseful music.

When the black façade starts to slowly rise up into the flies to reveal the garden and form the two spaces into a visual paradox, it pauses for a moment halfway up to frame the slow approach of Lelio and chevalier as they float towards us like insubstantial shadows in their contrasting red and black apparels. This has the effect of transforming the live characters into flickering pictures on a cinema screen. And, indeed,

Lassalle has quite openly confessed his debt to the cinema in this production as well as to Gustav Klimt's paintings.

The revealed garden looks palpably painted and artificial: nature has been frozen into a series of flimsy painted drapes representing several rows of trees with thick foliage stretching up as far as the eye can see. At the back, a further white screen, corresponding and contrasting with the front black façade, is visible behind the tree trunks. In the space between, illusion and reality become inextricably entangled, gradually fading into each other.

As the masks thicken, the trees menacingly advance to envelop the characters, and their movement threads a complicated pattern among them; but as the end approaches and the day light fades into dusk, they recede again then begin to disappear into the flies row after row, sometimes pausing half way up with their trunks ridiculously and rather pathetically hanging in mid-air, until finally, in a stunning *coup de theatre*, the backdrop too is lifted and the stage becomes completely bare with the exposed backstage forming a shadowy vacuum behind.

Poor Arlequin strolls in expecting the old familiar world and suddenly faces this void; his piercing scream of terror is quite unforgettable. Conceived by Lassalle and rendered by Gerard Giroudon as a village idiot, a simpleton, an 'innocent' in the old and new sense of the word, he is incapable of pretence, deceit or any form of disguise, and is therefore favoured with a glimpse of the truth. Nevertheless, he chooses to keep up the pretence. What else can he do when the only reality is a dark hole in the ground?

He turns his back on the void and joins the other characters who, still unaware of the circumambient darkness, are busy setting the stage

for what turns out to be a mock supper ritual, with wine, song and music. The countess sits rigidly between her two false suitors then suddenly rises and withdraws, her spoon clattering faintly to the ground. The sacrificial lamb has been slaughtered. With the countess's departure, the supper becomes an ironical ceremony marking the initiation of the heroine, the former chevalier, into a new role as a hardened, disillusioned and cynical realist. At the end of the scene and as the lights begin to dim, she looks up into the flies where the scenery has disappeared then slowly turns her head towards our darkened area with a quizzical Mona Lisa smile.

This final scene is truly a theatrical gem and is, apart from Marivaux's lyric, completely of Lassalle's own devising. The visual dialectic initially established by the twin contrasting spaces and subsequently developed is finally resolved here as night overtakes day, uniting the two spaces and sinking the theatrical pageant we call the world into one huge darkness relieved only by a few scattered flickering flames.

Our cartoon middle class couple may not like Lassalle's *Suivante*, may even find it disconcerting. But if the French and the Comédie Française keep on bringing over such wonderful stuff we may still be able to convince them that a penetrating comment on the utter futility of the human condition can be quite exhilarating and wonderfully invigorating.

Withering Heights

Marivaux's *La Seconde Surprise de L'Amour* at Al-Hanager*

If troubles do not come singly but in threes, according to the proverb, why not lucky breaks as well? Within only a month and a half of ferrying over to Cairo La Comédie Française with a stunning production of Marivaux's *La Fausse Suivante*, bewitchingly directed by Jacques Lassalle, the French Cultural Centre in Cairo has decided to follow up its first fairy godmother treat with a 'seconde surprise'.

A production of yet another oeuvre of Marivaux was picked out, this time from the repertoire of the prestigious Theatre National de Lille (known as La Metaphore). Given that this is no centennial year, this harping on Marivaux (with yet another of his plays scheduled for a run in Cairo this year) must be prompted by a sudden urge on the part of the French to impress upon the world the greatness of this eighteenth century dramatist. What the two productions of his works the Cairene audiences have seen so far have proved, however, is the exhilarating variety of directing styles in France today.

Compared to *La Fausse Suivante*, *La Seconde Surprise de L'Amour* is by far the sunnier of the two texts. Here, the impediments to the course of true love are transitory or imaginary and leave no deep scars behind; and if eternal fidelity to lost loved ones is revealed to be no more than a bubble — iridescent with many colours but too fragile to last — the revelation is granted without rancour or cynicism. Indeed,

* 17.3.1994. In French.

with two couples joined in matrimony at the end, the play seems to look benignly and smilingly upon the breaking of any vows inimical to the life force. The flesh may be weak, and human nature flawed, but life, the play argues, is unreservedly worth living; it may be evanescent, but it is, like love, 'a many-splendoured thing'.

Surprisingly, while Lassalle managed to soften the brittle cynicism and arid moral nihilism of *La Fausse Suivante* with a substantial dose of warm sympathy and philosophical tolerance, Daniel Mesguich seemed shockingly determined to rob us of all props and comforts and to snuff out what little lights were provided by Marivaux to soften the gloom of our benighted condition. Nothing short of dismantling the whole rigged out apparatus we call reality seemed to satisfy him. And he did it with wonderful gusto and *élan*. With great pleasure we submitted to having our most vital and deeply cherished illusions torn to shreds and to having our perky noses rubbed into the dust and ashes of our mortality.

Every aspect and detail of this production of *La Seconde Surprise* was harnessed towards this end: the furiously torrential tempo; the violent, exaggerated and mechanical style of the acting and movement; the palpably clownish make-up of the Count (the Chevalier's rival for the hand of the beautiful widowed Marquise); the frequent eruption of hidden feelings in the form of physical action, sometimes at variance, or in sharp contradiction with the obvious situation and the surface drift of the dialogue; the presence throughout of a life-size marionette, its string in full view, representing the deceased husband, seated at a chessboard, with the pieces eerily resembling the characters on stage; the emphatically theatrical design of the set, with a curtained theatre box at

the back where the servants occasionally retire to watch their masters at their game or, rather, being manoeuvred by the dead, mechanical chess-player; the deliberately small and cramped performance area (created by curtaining off sections of Al-Hanager's stage) which suggested faintly a puppet-show stall or a small silent movie screen; the sudden and exhilarating flashes of pure theatrical juggling: like the moment when the Marquise's tutor or reading advisor (a direct descendent of Shakespeare's Malvolio in *Twelfth Night*) suddenly slips off his costume and saunters off in modern dress, or the erratic tumbling of a curtain in the third act to shut the clownish Count outside the set, or like the visual distortion which results from splitting one image into two halves and placing them at a distance from each other or in an overlapping position. An instance of the former arrangement of the split halves can be found in the scene where the Marquise sits in her chair at the back shaking a box while the servant of the Chevalier performs, front stage, the movement of a cut-out flat paper figure falling out of it; an instance of the latter is the scene where the Chevalier and his servant sit huddled together and their bodies overlap, seeming suddenly like one body with two heads and four hands. Equally thrilling is the projection of the same image from two opposite directions simultaneously using the theatre box at the back as a mirror with the aid of puppets.

Mesguich obviously delights in such thrills and gimmicks and his production abounds with them. Curiously, however, or maybe logically, as they pile up, one cannot help feeling that whatever humanity the text and its characters may have possessed has been flattened out of recognition by their weight and completely crushed. Watching life-size puppets acting human may be grotesque and a little

disturbing; but seeing live actors progressively stiffening into mechanical dolls is positively soul-shrivelling and spine-chilling — at least for this viewer. And as if to drive the horror home, Mesguich treated his audience to the sight of the gradual decomposition of the dead husband's doll-corpse. But rot as it may, and by the third act it had rotted considerably, it never lost its deep hollow voice. Not satisfied with eroding the dividing line between humans and robots and exposing our strings and mechanical springs, Mesguich was careful to remind us of our mortality (dolls though we may be), and, what was more, to assure us that death was no liberator.

If Shakespeare (a seminal influence on Marivaux) believed that "all the world's a stage" and "all the men and women merely players", Mesguich seems to argue that all the world is but a tawdry puppet-show stall and all are dolls and puppets in it. A dismal image with no trace of hope and not an ounce of comfort. Still, for recompense there is always the exhilarating experience of watching a superb theatrical imagination run riot, of being lifted up to new heady heights. One should not remain there for too long, however. There, the air is thin and life may wither. Nevertheless, it is a great pity that this exciting *Seconde Surprise* of Marivaux played only one night in Cairo.

Old Timber to New Fires

Racine's *Berenice* at Al-Hanager*

Having met Racine more than once at his home base in La Comédie Française, I can safely declare that in *Berenice* (seen at Al-Hanager last week), Christian Rist has succeeded where more famous directors have dismally failed. For once, the grandeur, the serenity and sculptured elegance we usually associate with classicism have reached us unmarred by stiffness and rigidity. Curiously, the austere asceticism of the production — in terms of movement, colour, props and costumes — and the starkly denuded look of the stage created an intensely rich and haunting emotional experience. The frequent, alternate freezing of the three main actors — spaced out geometrically in a visual triangle on their raised, intersecting platforms, with a circle of golden light in the centre — produced a dream-like effect. Whenever they turned their backs on us and froze into stillness — whether in standing or sitting postures — one experienced a very real and disturbing feeling that one had only imagined that they had earlier spoken or moved. At moments, the stillness became almost hypnotic, generating waves of unseen energy and one felt as if one was watching their still forms through a haze of intense heat or that they were themselves about to melt into a haze. Solidity and etherealness were magically combined here to create a visual poetry of immense beauty, akin to the poetry of sculpture and architecture. Predictably, in this kind of production where the poetry of form is paramount, plot and character become marginal. We care little about story-line, motive or circumstance. What is communicated to us

* 5.6.1994. In French.

from the stage is an intensity of pain, caught at its height and frozen in perpetual freshness for all time.

Here, Racine's musical verse seemed to carve the silence, reaching far beneath the surface meaning of the words; it had a tangible physical presence beyond sound and you could almost see it casting shadows and sculpting the space. The operatic quality characteristic of all classical drama was here alright, but shot through with an intense intimacy and a vibrant sense of immediacy. Without this, I doubt if the audience who were fortunate enough to get tickets for this one-night show could have stayed glued to their seats for close on three hours without an interval.

Needless to say, the acting was superb; all the actors belong to Le Studio Classique which Rist founded in Paris in 1982. But the choice of a North African actress (Fejria Deliba) for the role of Berenice was particularly fortunate. Not only did she seem more credible as an oriental queen, but the colour of her skin and costumes provided an eloquent contrast with those of Titus (Olivier Werner) and Antiochus (Philippe Muller), and the contrast hinted at a nebulous political sub-text: one could not help remembering Kipling's "east is east and west is west" and hear in the tragic separation of Berenice and Titus an echo of "ne'er the twain shall meet". In a sense, the production seemed to put its whole artistic weight against that dictum.

It is a great pity that a production of this calibre could only play for one night. For me, the evening was marred by the sight of so many young people crowding at the door of the theatre and, having failed to get tickets to be allowed to watch the show standing or squatting on the floor, having the doors shut in their faces. This alone is enough to call

into question the validity of such cultural encounters. It brings to the fore, for maybe the hundredth time, the question of who gets to see what? The audience that night was made up of critics, journalists, high officials, a sprinkling of theatre professionals and possibly half the French community in Cairo. When I put this complaint to Hoda·Wasfi, the director of the Al-Hanager, her one reply was: money. Al-Hanager has no budget at its disposal and has to rely on the erratic generosity of the foreign cultural relations departments and the Cultural Development Fund in the Ministry of Culture. And until Al-Hanager is given a regular budget, Hoda Wasfi has to manage as best she can and we, critics and theatre-reviewers, have to keep on feeling guilty every time we are privileged to see a visiting show.

Carmen at the Circus

Luly, an Egyptian musical based on the famous opera at the Balloon theatre*

In retrospect, CIFET seems to have been no more than a sudden flash of lightening that flooded the Egyptian theatre with brilliant light for one brief moment after which it plunged back into its customary gloom. With the exception of the Balloon, all the state-run theatres have switched off their lights, let down the shutters and firmly closed the gates. Even the cultural centres are theatrically out of action. The sense of vacancy and the state of post-festival depression which attack the critic annually, at this time of year, are exacerbated by this deplorable theatrical void which usually coincides with the onset of autumn.

Generally, it would be unfair to watch any show in this mood. In the case of *Luly*, however, it was different; but for this mood, I doubt very much if I could have tolerated its four hours of noisy drivel till the end. Still, as light, popular entertainment, a rambling array of music hall and circus numbers, stitched together by a flimsy romance, the show mostly works. But one should guard against remembering Bizet's *Carmen* on which *Luly* is based. Any comparison would shatter the latter beyond repair. Not that *Luly* was a hustled up affair or begotten by weaklings; the preparations and rehearsals took almost a year and it came to us armoured with a shield of prestigious names. The names of director Murad Mounir, composer Ammar El-Shere'i, stage designer Hussein El-Izabi and choreographer Adel Abdou command a great deal

* 28.9.1995. In Arabic.

of respect in theatrical circles. And when these are joined by the famous poet Ahmed Fouad Nigm and veteran playwright Mohamed El-Fil (as the co-authors of the libertto and dialogue), the list becomes positively daunting. Indeed, I feel almost sacrilegious for not finding the show a perfect gem. (*Luly*, by the way, means pearls.)

But a perfect gem it wasn't, and the fault lies as much with the libertto and direction as with the music. The libertto gives a very free adaptation of the Meilhac and Halévy original (which they based, in a very free form, on Prosper Mérimée's novel, *Carmen*).

Here, Don José is no longer a humble sergeant to lieutenant Zuniga, but is presented as a commanding officer and a knight in a shining white tunic, literally, on a white horse. Zuniga, on the other hand, is split into two characters: Don José's kindly superior and prospective father-in-law, and a dumb, clownish underling. Don José's rival, Escamillio, the toreador, suffers a similar fate, splitting into two rivals: Luly's jilted fiancé, a fellow gypsy, and the circus juggler and magician for whom she eventually jilts Don José. Carmen's female friends, Frasquite and Mercédes, on the other hand, are amalgamated into one, while Don José's fiancé, Michaela, is banished from the stage. Although she is promoted from peasant girl to the superior's daughter, we never see or hear her.

Clearly, the star of the show, Fayza Kamal, wanted as few female characters around her as the two librettists could help and as many male rivals for her favours as they could conjure up. The purpose behind the promotions and demotions of the various characters' ranks is also obvious: to create a class struggle between the lower ranks of society, represented by the poor and marginalised gypsy community, and the

ruling classes to which Don José, his fiancée and her father are made to belong. Unfortunately, this political message, always close to the heart of Nigm, El-Fil and Mounir, was not allowed to remain implicit in the treatment, but was forced upon us sometimes, quite obtrusively, in clear, unequivocal words, and the result was, invariably, embarrassment.

As for Carmen herself, she came in for a lot of glamorisation, simplification and sentimentalisation. As Luly, she was exempted from the obligation of having to stab a fellow factory worker in the first act. Actually, there was no factory to begin with and it was a good thing too, considering the flimsy, revealing clothes she always wore. Not even a gypsy can get away with such get-ups in a factory. Her guilt was, dramatically speaking, shifted onto José's shoulders; he is made to kill her fiancé's bosom friend, who is also her cousin, in a battle over her. The authors clearly had the Romeo, Juliet, Tybalt, Mercutio quartet in mind. The crime provides the necessary motive for the couple to run away.

In her Luly version, Carmen is further whitewashed and superficialised; she is provided with a very proper and topical motive for her change of heart towards José: he forces her to wear the veil and stay at home. When they fall into the hands of the smugglers, an episode that the director makes a meal of, stretching the scene over half an hour, she saves the day by taking off the thick *niqab* and treating them to a taste of her voluptuous dancing; and this is the last we hear of the smugglers. In the next scene, she is in a tavern; José is deep in booze and her former fiancé is disguised as a bearded singer. But whatever tension builds up is soon dissipated by Ahmed Maher's

melodramatic acting as José, and Mohamed El-Helw's mellifluous and musically and dramatically superfluous rendering of old Abdel-Wahab songs to the tunes of his lute. And as if two rival lovers are not enough, a circus acrobat and juggler barges in to sweep *la belle* Luly off her feet. I suppose that an Egyptian acrobat and a circus-ring (the setting of the final scene) are good equivalents for a toreador and a bull-ring. Was it just a fluke, or did the authors get the idea from Escamillo's song in the inn, in Act II of *Carmen*. Doesn't he say:

See now the glorious circus filling with people gay
Bent on holiday.
Hark! how they're shouting
Cries loud and thrilling.

Escamillo had a bull-ring in mind; but why not a circus. The director may even have hoped that the circus acts presented in the last scene would draw from his audience "cries loud and thrilling". Sadly, they extracted only faint applause. Even the double row of eight-foot-high sparklers, ignited as a kind of grand finale to the show (engulfing the stage, the dead Luly, limply slumped on a swing, and, incidentally, the first five rows, in thick white choking smoke) failed to draw more than the requisite modest hand. Conspicuous in the auditorium was a fleet of stage hands brandishing fire extinguishers — just in case.

Clearly, in *Luly*, musical and dramatic considerations were a poor second to theatrical ones. The adaptation adopted a sentimental view of Bizet's opera, reducing the characters' complexity, and substituting for passion sexual titillation. With a versatile, mobile set and a huge army of dancers and extras, costumed in a medley of colours and styles, not

to mention the band of circus performers, which included a horse, a monkey and a goat (there was no trace of the lion and the fearful serpent mentioned in the printed programme), director Murad Mounir tended towards the sensational and the over-explicit in this handling of the libretto. Would a more powerful score than the one supplied by Ammar El-Shere'i have saved the show from total disintegration? Perhaps not. But he could have tried a little better to create characters in music and to use thematic material to link the story together.

Burning Ice:
A French version of Checkov's *Three Sisters**

There is nothing more depressing and bone-chilling than the sight of an empty auditorium just as the curtain is about to go up. Last Wednesday, half an hour before the Ballatum Theatre's visiting production of the *Three Sisters* was due to start, there were only a handful of people in the elegant auditorium of Al-Gomhoria Theatre, though by nine o'clock enought people had fortunately trickled in to fill a few rows. I kept wishing that the viewers who had taken the cheap gallery seats would come down to dispel the chill and inject some warmth into the cheerless atmosphere. I could not understand why a guest show of this calibre got such little publicity and could not make up my mind whether to blame the Opera management or Le Centre Français de Culture in Cairo.

The same dismal treatment was meted out two weeks ago to another guest show from the Black Light Theatre of Prague. It was an excellent production of *Peter Pan* adapted and directed by the internationally famous Czech artist Jiri Srnec and I expected to find the theatre crawling with children and school kids, but on two different nights, a Wednesday and a Friday, the theatre was dismally empty. Many theatre reviewers complained to me that they never even heard of the existence of these two productions and I seriously think it is about time the Opera management did something about its publicity policy.

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* 2.5.1996. In French.

What a pity so few people had the chance to enjoy and be deeply provoked by the Balatum Theatre's *Three Sisters*. It offered a startling, and at times quite shocking reading of Chekhov's piece, laying bare in all their naked rawness its undercurrents of passion, despair and violence. Within a quarter of an hour, all my expectations, based on former productions, had been ruthlessly chased out, leaving me with a perilous, overpowering sense of freedom. It is a feeling one rarely gets in the theatre nowadays and it is deeply thrilling. It was a bare, austere production that stripped away the old world charm of the play and its comforting lyricism.

There was no sweet Irena here, no soft, melancholic Masha, no tender, motherly Olga, but three modern women, in modern dress, bursting with stormy passions and suppressed sexuality. The bare set of Antoine Dervaux, consisting of nothing but a long, naked dining table and a few chairs, visually communicated a terrible sense of emptiness and the carefully orchestrated rhythm of the stylised movement accentuated this feeling. The floor of the stage was drenched in grey light which matched the drab greyness of the male characters' uniforms. This was a world truly stripped of all comforts, where love, joy and sexual fulfilment were truly impossible.

The despair reaches its apex in the fire scene which occurs in act three of the play and forms its climax. In the hands of directors Guy Allouchoric and Eric Lacascade, the scene became a stunningly electrifying piece of theatre. With nothing but two buckets of water, a heap of old clothes and the faint glare of a distant fire they created a vision of hell on stage. Here violence and ritual merged in magical poetic fusion to body forth in vivid images all that Chekhov leaves

unsaid. The final garden scene also had its full share of haunting, silent imagery. I do not think I shall ever forget Masha kneeling on the table and burying her face in a heap of flowers, or the sight of her clinging desperately to Vershinin, hugging him with her legs as his arms hang limply beside him, or the sight of her stretched out hand, frozen in midair. It will be also impossible to forget Toozenbach violently pushing away Irena before being dragged away to his death, not in an honourable duel but like a struggling beast led to the slaughterhouse. I had not thought a production of any of the plays of gentle Chekhov could be so burningly ruthless and utterly uncompromising.

Sailing Through No-Man's Land

Philippe Genty's and Mary Underwood's *Voyageur Immobile*, at the Opera House*

At first, I could not tell, in the total darkness that engulfed the stage and auditorium, where the madly jabbering voice was coming from. It took me some minutes to discover a small spot of light down stage left. It seemed to be coming from a box, and fitfully revealed the spectral face of a man apparently squatting and talking ceaselessly into the invisible source of light directed at him from down below. Occasionally, he made frantic attempts to shut out (or, rather, in) the light with his hat. He looked and sounded quite eerie, the same as the faint, but vaguely threatening sound effects in the background. More disturbing still, one could not make out what that demented voice was saying. I thought I caught a word here, a phrase here; but those with far better French than mine assure me that the frenzied verbal avalanche was pure gibberish.

This unsettling image persisted for a few more minutes, then suddenly, the lights went up on stage and, lo and behold! A group of castaways on a desert island in the middle of a big blue sea. It felt as if they had all spilt out of the invisible box containing the light, or as if the imprisoned light had managed to escape and dispel the darkness, revealing what had always been there.

The effect was magical. It did not matter that the island was a small, square platform, or that the sea was a huge plastic, or cellophane sheet

* 3.4.1997. In French.

that covered the stage completely, with air pumped underneath it to make it billow. The scene was so enchanting one could not help surrendering to the illusion, suspending the rational point of view, and embracing this world of make-believe.

The castaways, a weird assortment of people vaguely reminiscent of times past, were frozen in a tableau vivant for a few moments then came to life, indulging in various antics. One man, dressed as a colonial officer, mimed the positions of a classical ballerina; another, in his underwear, a sports cap of his head and a puffed up white tulle skirt round his waist, declaimed snatches from Hamlet's famous "To be" soliloquy, mercillessly sawing the air with his arms. A woman with pigtails and a white dress (vaguely suggesting the conventional image of a fairytale princess) went up to another woman dressed in baggy men's trousers and suspenders and covering her head with a rubber helmet sporting a green crest, unzipped her flies and inserted her hand inside. After some feeling about, she produced a small, mechanical toy bird and threw it up in the air. It circled once or twice, then flopped down into the sea. The others — two men in suits and hats and a woman in a straight white gown with frills — mimed various actions, including arguing and quarreling. There were even sudden eruptions of song. The cramped space made the sequence all the more exciting. The danger that one of the castaways could easily tip over was always present.

This crazy medley of actions which gives the characters, so early in the performance, an ambivalent identity as both adults (which is what they look) and children (which is how they behave), was punctuated at intervals with pauses when the actors would freeze, gaze out to sea,

shade their eyes to scour the horizon for a boat, and hold that position for seconds. Was it after one such pause that the little boat appeared? I cannot remember; I was already feeling breathless and dizzy like someone on the brink of a stunning discovery or about to be catapulted into space. What I remember is that, suddenly, it was there — a small (really tiny compared to the adult actors), pathetic white toy boat, crossing the stage from left to right and braving the, by then, more agitated waves.

It reminded me of the toy paper boats we used to make as children and float in the sink, the bath tub or a bowl out on the balcony. One sometimes enjoyed turning on the tap just as the boat was passing underneath it and, playing at being malignant fate without knowing it, laugh at seeing it capsize and sink. And this is exactly what happened to Genty's boat. But this time, the tap was up in the flies and some mysterious hand turned it on. As the boat shuddered and sank under the force of the thin, relentless stream of water shooting down from above, I felt I was receding into the past at light speed, carried by these plastic, fictional waves back to the world of the nursery, the doll's house and the playground. It was thrilling and frightening. At my age, you forget what the world was really like when you were 2 or 5 or even 7 — that is, before you had become conditioned to systematise, categorise, schematise, rationalise and verbalise your sensations and learnt to cut up reality as you experience it into neat segments and divide it among the many arbitrary pigeonholes carefully labeled fact, fiction, dreams, lies, artistic imaginings or hallucinations.

Like most mothers, I was blessed with a few glimpses of that "unrationalised" reality when my daughter was a baby and toddler.

Through her eyes I rediscovered the freshness, novelty and latent potential for artistic reshaping of the basest of materials and most ordinary of objects; she brought home to me the fact that, like poets, children relate to the world primarily through metaphor. Such glimpses, however, can prove too much to bear, like gulping too much oxygen all of a sudden. Reliving the experience of the sinking paper boat left me feeling heady and somewhat disoriented. The feeling sharpened when I suddenly found the castaways inside a cardboard packing crate, clearly marked 'fragile'. The island had magically disappeared and been replaced by a ship tossing on the waves. The actors, themselves, had effected the transformation by a cunning sleight of hand; but it had been done so quickly that, though I had seen them handling bits of cardboard earlier and passing them around, I hardly noticed it.

A sequence of quick, short, silent scenes, involving two or three actors at a time, and once a puppet, followed. Some were naughty and broadly comic, some downright farcical, and one morbidly and harrowingly grotesque. In the row in front of me, two children about 6 or 7 were laughing uproariously, and no wonder. They were right in their element where dolls can have a will of their own, where a moving finger can become a crawling insect, and where it takes only a small and effortless leap of the imagination to jump inside a box and merrily sail away. I could not share their merriment; the sight of that lonely crate, with its fragile human cargo, floating precariously, in the moonlight, on a wide, empty sea, with a wall of impenetrable darkness all around, was too painful a metaphor of the human condition to leave room for laughter.

It was clear by then that Genty's 'voyageur', though 'immobile', did not intend to stop at rediscovering the world of the nursery and, with it, a mode of perception beyond the boundaries of reason and common sense (a mode children know and we have lost), but meant to sail deeper and carry us with him to explore the subterranean regions of the mind, the secret waterways under the polished floorboards, the world of dreams and archetypes. Indeed, already, the archetypal metaphor of life as a voyage on a turbulent sea had become a living reality on stage — though palpably artificial, a matter of plastic and cardboard. The rapid flow of Genty's concrete theatrical metaphors had the effect of collapsing the boundaries between illusion and reality, the natural and the artificial, the adult and the child, the animate and inanimate, establishing a new logic that relies on metaphors and correspondences in making sense of the world, rather than 'cause and effect', and on ambivalence and paradox as a mode of signification. This collapsing of rational boundaries could be seen and sensed everywhere, and was the moving spirit of the work and its guiding structural principle. It orchestrated the flow of images and sequences into a visual symphony that took its rhythm from the sea, the ebb and flow of its waves.

It took me sometime to realise that, despite its over-powering spontaneous flow and obvious fluidity, the performance was subtly organised into four successive movements, corresponding to the four natural elements, with the accent in the first and third on air and water, in the second, on earth and fire, and in the fourth on earth. Each movement seemed to flow out of the other quite naturally, suggesting a process of continuous reproduction and the continuous cycle of birth, death and rebirth, and the rhythm of their succession invoked, through

Gealle De Malglaive's stunningly intricate lighting design, the rhythm of the movement from night to dawn, to noon and twilight.

The theme of reproduction surfaces midway through the first movement and is metaphorically and ironically joined, through the big crate marked 'fragile', to the theme of packaging. Julie Andrews' 'brown-paper packages, tied up with string' (in her famous song) may not always be a source of comfort. In Genty's world, or no-man's-land, they can hold a doll or a human, be a gift or a coffin. The first baby we see is in the form of a man's face, appearing from under the cover of a serving dish through a hole in the big crate. The castaways have apparently become cannibals, feeding on their children. But, then, a human figure rises from the box, his head wrapped round, removes what looks like the top of his skull, and proceeds to pluck out his brain and stuff it into the mouth of the screaming and spitting baby. When the adult figure finally collapses a woman replaces the dish-cover on top of the baby's face.

The first movement ends with two riveting scenes that establish reproduction and packaging (ambivalently viewed) as the controlling themes of the work. In one, the sea is quiet, the wind has died down. A man comes out of the crate, which now seems deserted, as if all its passengers had died; his body is completely covered with cardboard boxes which makes his movements comically awkward; he steps gingerly into the water to explore his surroundings and eventually, as he becomes more confident, discards the cartons round his body, leaving only the ones on his feet. In the next scene, the crate, which the man had tipped to lie on its side before he disappeared, becomes a doll's house, made of four square compartments or boxes. Each holds the

body of a soft and floppy baby doll with one of the actors providing it with a human head. At once, the image of the womb was superimposed on that of the doll's house. The human heads chatter, sing and quarrel, then, suddenly, the sea, now completely dark, suddenly swells and the four boxes separate and float away on the invisible waves and are swallowed by the darkness. Labels like back theatre or surrealism fail to describe the shattering impact and symbolic power of this scene.

As the dark blue sheet covering the stage is pulled away, like the tide going out, the second movement flows in. The light changes: it's sunrise, and we have arrived at a rugged desert. On one side, at the back, there is a toy-town; on the opposite side, a hill. A toy truck, which recalls the toy ship in the first movement, crosses the stage slowly on its way to the toytown. Then the seven castaways start, one by one, to rip through the paper sheets covering the stage and appear from underneath them. The dead have risen, and, once more, they are both adults playing at being children and children playing at being adults. When the man with the white skirt drops down, like a hen laying an egg, dozens of plastic baby dolls appear from under his skirt; the actors quarrel over them, play father and mother to them, sing nursery rhymes, then form a train and push the dolls in a row in the direction of the town.

There, the lights of a toy fairground and a carousel shine, but the visit to the fairground gives way to a gruesome reproduction game where the plastic dolls are successively fed into a toy cannon, shot into a toy processing machine, and received at the other end into small plastic bags. The movement ends with what looks like an amorphous, moving white mass erupting out of the small hill, and rolling on,

heaving and swelling, to cover the whole stage and drown everything. It is another huge plastic sheet with air pumped into it to create another sea; but, this time, it looks like a white sea of clouds. The castaways are glimpsed popping up and down among the high waves, then a winged woman in white, holding a red rose, floats into view. We soon discover she is the angel of death and the touch of her rose is lethal. She reminded me of Charon, the ferryman who, in Greek mythology, brought the dead across the river of Styx or Acheron to Hades. It seemed that those travellers struggling among the waves, some carrying suitcases or handbags, were on their way to heaven, or the other world. But in Greek mythology there were no customs officers at the gates of Hades to ask you to show your passport or open your suitcase. Here, they were, in suits and hats, shouting in various tongues. One by one, the travellers are encased in big, transparent plastic bags, float away and go under. The movement ends with a shower of plastic baby dolls, the same we had seen earlier, hanging down from little, white, fluttering parachutes, and descending upon the clouds. Immediately, the wind dies, and the white plastic sheet quickly recedes and disappears.

The fourth movement takes us back to an even more cheerless desert than the one before. The lighting dims, creating a kind of lurid and unearthly twilight. Dance plays a major role in this movement; but despite the thrilling choreography and the breath-taking proficiency of the actors, the general mood is at once elegiac, grotesque and nightmarish. After showing us the artistic potential of plastic and cardboard, Genty, with his stage-designer, Martin Rezard, explore here the potential of different types of brown wrapping paper. Like the plastic bags which encased the actors in the previous movement, brown

paper is here, in one sequence, wrapped round the actors, one by one, and moulded round their bodies. When the last of the seven (note the choice of number) has been wrapped and moulded, the stage, with the scattered, recumbent, immobile figures, looks like a graveyard.

But, unseen, the actors had slipped out of their moulds (which kept their shapes) unnoticed. They suddenly appear en masse and proceed to jump up and down on the brown paper shapes to flatten them. It was a moment of true wonder and magical in its effect. I am almost sure that the sequence of the grotesque human-size puppet followed. But in the presence of such a dizzying whirl of images, it is difficult to be certain. Before one had had time to assimilate one image, another, equally vivid, evocative and disturbing, had replaced it. The man puppet appears out of a cardboard box and institutes himself as the leader of the group on their flight (or march?) out of the graveyard in the direction of the audience. While the actors mime running, the puppet, held on both sides by two actors, seems to be advancing with wide, firm steps. At the beginning, it is dressed in a medieval suit of armour; but, during the march, it falls off to reveal a man's suit, then the trousers fall, and we discover a pair of stockinged female legs in a seductive garter belt. And as if that were not enough, the puppet, itself, begins to fall apart — first an arm, then a leg, then another arm, until nothing remains but the head and trunk. The puppet had braved its disasters and continued to march until the last limb. The great escape (or march of human progress?) fails: the leader was only a travesty. The actors try to pack what remained of the puppet back in the box, but it resists, and finally sticks its head in a sheet of brown paper and flies away, looking like a huge, mythical bat, with a human head, and leaving its body behind. All the

transformations of this puppet were effected by the actors themselves whose puppeteering skills match their superb dancing. miming and vocal proficiency.

I cannot pretend to remember how the performance ended, and, perhaps, we are not meant to. All I remember after the horrible nightmare of the bat is some actors walking about reciting snatches of vaguely familiar poems, one of them about empty cities. I also remember rushing out of the auditorium, forgetting my shawl behind, and feeling quite stunned and numb. The feeling persisted for over two hours afterwards and I could not sleep that night.

To describe *Le Voyageur Immobile* as haunting is not just inadequate, but positively insulting: such words have became debased by over-use. It is one of those rare theatrical works which seem designed to teach critics humility, and drive home to them the inadequacy of any critical jargon, indeed, of verbal language itself to deal with the stuff that dreams are made of.

Welcome to No-Man's Land

Egypt as reflected in Bruno Meyssat's *Imentet, passage par l'Egypte* at Al-Hanager*

As E.M. Forster, Joseph Conrad and countless others will tell you, encountering an alien culture is a very risky business: it can be liberating or devastating. It can also pose a threat that may evoke, in reaction, an intransigent, inward-looking attitude, a deeper entrenchment in one's own culture, or alternatively a paranoiac drive to eliminate the threat by eradicating the other's culture, incorporating it into one's own, or casting over it the mantle of exoticism. Whatever the response, it is never quite a personal or private matter; the context of the encounter (festival, leisurely tour or military campaign), the position of the parties involved in relation to their own cultures (centre or fringe), the age, history, prestige and underlying politico-economic driving force of each culture, invariably play a part in determining its nature. If the encountered culture is old, hybrid, and multi-ethnic, like Egypt's, the act of responding becomes even more problematic, and it may require years of intimate observation, tolerant interaction, and many intuitive leaps (as it did in the case of Edward Lane, the author of *The Manners and Customs of Modern Egyptians*) for the outsider to comprehend the intricate complexity of such a culture, its inner dialectics and tensions, and the visible and invisible processes and practices which sustain it and hold it together, even though they may often seem paradoxical.

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* 22.1.1998. French and Arabic.

This is the risk Bruno Meyssat undertook when he embarked on his *Passage par l'Egypte*, which premiered in Valence, France, on 5 November, 1997, and played three nights at Al-Hanager last week. The production came as one of the many artistic and cultural events created by both France and Egypt to celebrate 200 years of cultural relations since Napoleon's campaign in 1898, and grouped under the rubric Horizons Partagés. As such, it was almost a commissioned work, bound to a specific, controversial occasion (and an official, governmental one at that), and not, quite, the result of an artistic impulse to come to grips with an alien culture. This is not to say that before *Imentet* Meyssat was a complete stranger to Egypt. He had visited it twice before, during the Cairo International Festival for Experimental Theatre, with two productions: *Ajax*, in 1991, and *Passacaille*, in 1994; the two productions, particularly *Ajax*, which was given the award for best scenography by the international jury but caused a deep division of opinion and a heated controversy among Egyptian critics and the festival's audiences, have made Meyssat a familiar name among young, experimental theatre artists in Egypt, particularly the Al-Hanager crowd, and familiarised them with his own eccentric brand of theatre aesthetics and stylistics.

In terms of themes, rhythm, mood, compositional pattern and the demands (in-built in the structure) it makes on the spectator, *Imentet passage par l'Egypte* (Imentet being the name of the goddess of the West in Ancient Egyptian mythology) did not differ from the two previous Meyssat productions seen in Cairo, and held no surprises. It displayed the same obsessive, almost morbid preoccupation with death and decay, the same intense fascination with myth and ritual, the grimly determined shunning of humour and negation of sensuality (coupled

with a pronounced and sensuous appreciation of wood, stone, brick and sand), the striving after a free-association type of effect to replace chronological narrative, the eloquent use of sound to offset, enhance, or counterpoint the visual image projected on stage, the calculated slowing down of the movement to achieve an hypnotic effect, the concept of time as a continuum where the distinctions between past and present are completely fudged, and the deliberately inconsequential shifts and transitions, designed to force the spectators to fill in the gaps, out of their own experience.

The look of the set suggested at once a strip-lit ancient Egyptian tomb, a traditional street-café in Luxor, the alleys of the Al-Hussein district in Cairo, and various other factual and mythical places — a funeral morgue, a mummification room, the other world, the bedroom of Isis and Osiris, and the Egyptian Museum of Antiquities, among others. The costumes, in their turn, totally ignored the Mediterranean dimension of Egyptian culture, shunned any hint of Western influence, and were on the whole inspired by the Pharaonic murals and various types of traditional Egyptian dress. Even in the scene which features a female French tourist recounting her experience of the Egyptian Museum, her fascination with a mummified baboon (a sacred animal in Ancient Egypt because it squealed with joy at the rise of the sun), and telling us, in perhaps the most authentic moment in the performance, that when she tried to take a photo of it, inside its glass case, her own reflection in the glass stood in the way, Meyssat chose to dress the tourist in oriental garb. One could always quibble, of course, and falsely argue that it was all done in the name of the so-called 'shared horizons' context of the production. But the fact remains, that by doing so, Meyssat was negating the whole point of this most sensitive and

deeply moving scene which insists on the need to recognise the barriers, however transparent, which intercept any process of communication, of the reaching out of the self towards the other, by feeding us back our own image.

The Egypt projected visually on stage was the Egypt one comes across in 19th century travellers' books and paintings. In contrast, the accompanying modern sound-track — a jumble of street noises and babble, random snatches of radio chat-shows, and excerpts from Nasser's historic speech in 1956 in which he announced the nationalisation of the Suez Canal — was much more lively and vivid, and frequently upstaged the seen action. Occasionally, it even made it seem pretentious, stultified, and deadly dull. Of course, Meyssat could have meant it to do just that, but I doubt it. More likely he meant it as a bridge between the past and the present. And whether he meant it or not, it resulted in a kind of facile identification of Nasser with Osiris, and seemed to imply, in a kind of expiatory gesture, that the nationalisation of the Suez Canal in '56 (to which France responded by waging war on Egypt, together with Britain and Israel) was tantamount to a resurrection.

I have no quarrel with *Imentet*'s implications and conclusions: they are quite worthy, if somewhat simplistic. Nor can I bring myself to criticise its severe adumbration of the rich complexity of Egyptian history in the interest of foregrounding the Pharaonic period. After all, we still make a lot of money out of this period, and since this is a French production, created exclusively by French artists (Ahmed El-Qee'i, the one Egyptian member of the cast, plays a very marginal role in the work and does not really count as one of its, creators), and

intended primarily for a French, rather than an Egyptian, audience, it may attract French tourists to Egypt and help undo some of the damage caused by the Luxor disaster — something devoutly to be wished.

One thing, however, I cannot forgive Monsieur Meyssat: his total disregard for the most important part of the survival gear of all Egyptians, past and present — their sarcastic, often cynical sense of humour. It has always been their most effective weapon against the tyranny of the gods, the Pharaohs, the temple priests, their rulers and foreign invaders. It's what has kept them going, held them together, and cushioned them against the blows of fate, and God knows they have been many. Even Ancient Egypt had its satirists, mockers, and cartoonists. But then, as a friend told me recently, Monsieur Meyssat is a man who never smiles.

Perhaps Meyssat's passage through Egypt was a little hasty and all too short. Had he spent more time wandering around (I am told he and his actors, of the Theatre du Shaman Company, spent one month in Egypt, mostly in Luxor and the monument-infested desert around Cairo), and not had his imaginative course firmly set westward, in the direction of Imentet and her pale, Western horizon, the jackal-headed Anubis who had the unenviable task of guiding the dead to judgement (and who dominates the first scene of the play), and the lugubrious Coffin Texts and Book of the Dead, he might have come up with a livelier, more rounded and full-blooded impression of Egypt and its culture.

Having said that, I hasten to add that Meyssat's humourless, tenebrous *Passage par l'Egypte*, though it may not appeal to many Egyptians, should be taken on its own terms and judged on its merits. It

does not pretend to give a definitive, all-inclusive account of Egypt and its culture; no work of art can ever do that. As with Durrell's Alexandria, though on a smaller and much humbler scale, the Egypt we see in *Imentet* is a personal fiction that reflects not so much an outer reality as the inner landscapes of the artist's mind.

Exit the Players

The ALIS Company at Al-Gomhoria theatre*

The French ALIS company production *100 Mobiles a Part I* (which pronounced in different ways could mean, among other things, one hundred motives minus one, or without appearent motive, or one hundred moving objects, or repeating the word 'bile' one hundred times starting at one) fanatically shunned the human body and was blissfully, or sadly, depending on your taste, completely devoid of passion. Indeed, as Pierre Fourny and Dominique Soria, austerely clad in black, and moving softly and sedately like two monks, went on moving or, rather, choreographing their various gigantic shapes and objects (needles, mineral water bottles, crescents, two swallows, cubes, a pair of binoculars, among other things) around the stage to create intriguing visual formations, occasionally accompanied by slide projections, the temperature inside Al-Gomhoria auditorium kept dropping until it became positively chilly.

I cannot pretend to have enjoyed *100 Mobiles* despite its many visual surprises and occasional stunning images. It was too cerebral for my taste, even in its humorous play on words, of which there was plenty. Except for one or two brief moments, if failed to achieve the kind of poetry and pathos that made the company's earlier production, *Catalogue d'un bonheur sans histoire*, such a favourite with the audience, the members of the international jury, and the Egyptian critics during the 1992 Cairo International Festival for Experimental Theatre.

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* 2.4.1998. In French.

That year, ALIS won the award for best technique, which in fact means best scenography. I suppose they can win it again this year with their *100 Mobiles*; but the fact remains that there was much more to *Catalogue d'un bonheur* than mere technique.

Most actors, predictably, hate the kind of theatre Fourny and his crew (mainly Dominique Soria and Christophe Goncalves) make and even refuse to consider it as theatre. In 1992, one actress walked out of the theatre in disgust during the performance of *Catalogue*, and another described him as a trickster, a conjurer, a puppeteer and the deadliest threat to the acting profession. Fourny would have told her, perhaps, that rather than banish the actors off the boards he wanted to transform them into makers and creators. Would she have believed him?

Phantom of an Opera

A new Egyptian version of Bizet's *Carmen* at Cinema Radio Theatre*

On 1 September last year, I received an invitation to a special performance (for critics and the censor's office) of what the expensive-looking card, which sported the names of comedian Mohamed Subhi and the minister of Information, Safwat El-Sherif, pompously called 'the first production of the Theatre For All Fetival'. While the title, which echoes the Reading For All national project, directly patronised by Susan Mubarak, hinted at a similar high level of state sponsorship and was intended to cash in on the popularity of the slogan, the timing (the festival opened on 2 September) strongly suggested a conspiracy to upstage the concurrent Cairo International Festival for Experimental Theatre in the media and steal the show from the minister of culture. It was another instance of the fierce rivalry between the two ministries over control of the arts and culture. In a thoroughly theatrical fashion, Subhi, a long-standing virulent enemy and acrimonious critic of CIFET, had finally managed, with the help of Safwat El-Sherif who controls the State Television and its colossal revenues, vast publicity apparatus and financial resources, to throw the gauntlet down to the experimental clan, and set up a rival festival which embodies his own middle-brow, pedagogic, sedate conception of theatre as education and chaste popular entertainment.

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* 29.7.1999. In Arabic.

TFAF (the English intitials may unfortunately suggest to Arabic-speakers the uncouth word *tifafa* – spittle) is not, strictly speaking, a festival at all. When I first heard about it, I linked it in my mind with other Television-sponsored and commissioned revivals of some plays from the Egyptian theatre repertoire, such as Saadeddin Wahba's *Sikket es-Salama* (*Road to Safety*) and Sa'dalla Wanus's '80s smash- hit *Al-Malek Huwa Al-Malek* (*The King is the King*) – both of which were performed and recorded for television in 1998, well before TFAF. I imagined that the festival which was hyped in the press, somewhat grandiloquently, as the magical cure for the ailing Egyptian theatre, a show-case for its forgotten treasures, and an effective way to rehabilitate it and establish a sense of continuity with the past, would include other television-sponsored productions besides Subhi's revival of Naguib El-Rihani's and Badi' Khayri's *An Everyday Story* (*Hikayet Kul Yoom*, 1940) – better known in a film-version of it, retitled *Li'bet es-Sit* (*Her Plaything*). But it turned out that TFAF was simply a glitzy, splendiferous, and morally orotund camouflage for a very prosaic business deal. According to its terms, the Egyptian television undertakes to fund a series of musicals and musical comedies based on famous works from the Egyptian and world theatre repertoire, and starring Mohamed Subhi and the well-known pop singer Simone. The proceeds from the box-office during the run of the plays go to Subhi and his company. In return, the Egyptian television gets the copyright for recording, televising, and marketing the production.

Television-funded productions are not a novel thing. At the end of 1961, Abdel Qadir Hatem, the minister of information then, established 'the television theatre' which initially consisted of three companies each producing a new play every fortnight. By the autumn of 1962, the

number had swelled to 10, employing 184 performers, and the plays ranged from adaptations of well-known Egyptian novels and foreign plays to original works by budding dramatists, like Mahmoud Diab and Ali Salem, and popular plays, particularly farces, from the repertoire of the National theatre and Naguib El-Rihani's company. The companies continued to thrive, reaching a peak of activity in '64 and '65. But in the summer of '66, there was a change of mood in the upper echelons of power; Hatem came suddenly under a cloud, and the companies were taken over by the ministry of culture. It was the end of Television Theatre.

Though it ultimately has the same objective, i.e. to provide television with much-needed material for its many new channels and have the edge on rival Arab televisions in the fiercely competitive T.V. drama and light entertainment market, the Theatre For All Festival is not a revival of the old state-run television theatre formula, or even a modified version of it. It is a new enterprise, based on a long-term partnership between the state and the private sector, and, therefore, very much in tune with the country's current liberal economic policy. Here, the role of the state is limited to putting up the money, providing the publicity, and making sure that the final product gets the approval of the censor; the rest of the work, indeed, the whole job from A to Z, is managed by private individuals, groups or companies, with an executive producer (in the case of TFAF, Mohamed Imara) acting as bursar.

On the face of it, this seems an ideal arrangement to get state subsidies for the arts without state interference or bureaucratic entanglements. But money, as everyone who works in fund-raising for

the arts knows, never comes without strings attached. If the state television invests money in theatre, it will be on the clear understanding that the productions it finances, and quite lavishly too, meet the requirements of the Arab market and its oil-rich magnets. On principle, it will play it safe, opting for stars and big names (who are not necessarily good performers), popular theatrical forms (farces, melodramas, vaudevilles, and musicals), light, untaxing plots, safe subjects and role-models, a sound moral message which endorses the fundamentals of the status quo and the dominant ideology, and, for good measure, a sprinkling of spurious political criticism (about as dangerous as the roaring of a tamed circus lion who has had his fangs removed and claws trimmed) by way of intellectual veneer.

But then, most sponsors and funding agencies have hidden agendas, and in the case of the Egyptian television, at least the agenda is well-known to everybody. Taken all in all, this new form of partnership between the state, represented by its television, and the private theatre companies could provide an acceptable alternative to complete reliance on the box-office or on private capital, which is usually timid, stinting, and solely profit-oriented. In this respect, I remember Lenin El-Ramli (who wrote most of his plays for his and Subhi's now defunct Studio 80 private company) once telling me that a little financial help from the state, be it in the form of tax concessions or reduced publicity rates, would substantially reduce the forbiddingly high prices of theatre tickets in the private sector and save it from the ravages of commercialism.

Now that Subhi has the state support his former, long-standing partner, El-Ramli, once dreamt of, what has he done with it?

At a 100, 75, 50, 30, and (for the very last rows) 15 Egyptian pounds, the ticket prices show no dramatic reductions and remain, even in these days of inflated prices where a hundred pounds does not seem like a lot of money, prohibitive for the average Egyptian family. This makes a mockery of the glossy 'theatre for all' slogan, revealing its true, implicit meaning: it is a theatre for all only in the sense in which any play broadcast on television can be watched by everybody; live performances, as always, remain solely the privilege of the well-to-do. In what way is this different from the usual business of the state buying and televising other private-sector productions? One would have thought that with practically all the production costs, fees, and wages covered from the television coffers, there would be room in the theatre for students, low-income families, and young people to enjoy a show live.

That was one reason which put me off attending the opening, or, rather, 'the critics and censors night' of TFAF last year. Another was the ungracious timing which blatantly (and quite childishly, I thought), pitted TFAF against CIFET in order to force people to take sides. There wasn't a whiff of subtlety anywhere in the publicity campaign, and its smug, self-righteous, "we're the saviours" media thrust, its frenzied denunciation of CIFET as the devil, and the root of all theatrical evil, and its alternately disdainful and venomous dismissal of its supporters as pretentious frauds, decadent sissies, easily dazzled ignoramuses, and salvish followers of Western fads were clearly echoed (though much toned down) in a kind of manifesto which took up 8 pages of the printed programme of the new version of *Her Plaything* which opened the so-called 'festival'.

The programme was shown to me by a friend who attended the opening, and the fulsome rhetoric of those pages, the pontificating tone, the hackneyed cliches and highfalutin claims, not to mention the histrionic trotting out of 'truth, benevolence, and beauty' (with such phrases as 'pure art', 'sublime human value', 'sacred fire', and 'the rock of Sysiphus' close at heels, and some quotations from world-famous writers trailing not far behind), were enough to kill one with embarrassment and put one off theatre for life. I would have still gone, out of sheer curiousity, if nothing else, except that I am passionately enamoured of the film Subhi's play was based on, and could not imagine anybody matching the inimitable performances of El-Rihani and Taheya Carioca as the 'Her' and 'Plaything' of the title, or the glow and zingy verve of the supporting cast which included some of the best comic talents Egypt has ever known. Where could Subhi get another Mary Muneeb, Aziz Othman, Abdel Fattah El-Qusary, Hassan Fayeq, Suliman Naguib, or Bishara Wakeem? I opted for safety and decided that since I had the film on videotape and could (as I often do) watch it whenever I liked, the last thing I wanted was a different version of it, or to watch anyone meddling with it.

With *Carmen*, it was different, I was there on 'the critics night', all agog with excitement. I am fond of Subhi's style of acting and greatly respect his finesse, sense of rhythm, and careful attention to detail as a director. And though, barring Simone, singer Arkan Fouad, and, to a lesser extent, Khalil Mursi, the cast consisted of actors of modest fame (though some of them, like Magdi Subhi, are quite gifted), or relatively new comers (like the graceful and confident Abeer Farouk, who could dance, sing, and act, and do them all with competence and captivating elegance) — nevertheless, the billed artistic crew was enough to whet

the appetite and raise great expectations. It included Omar Khayrat (musical score); Mohamed Baghdadi and Yusri Khamees (adaptation and lyrics); Samir Ahmed (sets); and Karim Tonsi (choreography); and, in line with the current fashion in most state and commercial theatres, the corps de ballet consisted almost exclusively of immigrant Russian dancers. But, above all, there was the irresistible pull of Bizet's sensational stroy of love, betrayal, and desperate revenge, the overpowering sensual appeal of its wild, fiery heroine, and the prospect of a spectacular musical full of passion, energy and colour. With a good adaptation that takes into account the rich emotional palette of the original and tries to reproduce its full range of diverse passions and variegated moods, the show could not go wrong. Success, artistic and financial, was assured, I thought, sipping my coffee in the foyer before the show and trying to spot one of the censors to put in a good word for Subhi. Any *Carmen* cannot be but disturbing and boldly passionate and daring in some degree, and I was afraid some stuffy, parochial censor might find it too shocking to pass.

I need not have worried; Subhi's *Carmen* was an extremely chaste, even prudish affair – as bland, bloodless and pallid as you can imagine. The decorous love scenes breathed an icy wind that numbed the audience and made them shiver with cold; Subhi's forced comic effects and laboured, heavy-handed humour made them yawn; and Simone's clumsy, contorted attempts to seduce Don Jose sent them to sleep. To wake them up for the final curtain, Subhi winds up this depressingly lifeless jumble of scenes, which sluggishly meandered for the best part of 4 hours, with a turgid blustering tirade against dictators, the herd-like mentality and submissiveness of their people, globalism, the U.S.A. and other superpowers, and, of course, and only too predicatbly,

against Israel, normalization, the Copenhagen meeting, and the whole peace process. To add insult to injury the tirade was written in sing-song ryhming verse – a kind of colloquial doggerel.

Like professional agitators, he treated the audience as a mob, and set about whipping up their emotions and bullying them into embracing his views without thinking, frantically screaming firey rhetoric at them all the time; he ended the crescendo of merciless plebeian hectoring with a final resounding crash of belligerent war cries. It was a cheap and easy trick to draw unthinking applause; but, ironically, it boomeranged; its final effect was to negate the content of the speech by clearly pointing out that Subhi was in fact using the same coercive tactics as the dictators he so vehemently condemns, and denying the audience the right to think and decide for themselves.

This may sound harsh; but I really can't forgive the treatment *Carmen* received in this play. While constantly reminding us of the opera by frequent insertions in the soundtrack of the show of familiar bits of Bizet's score, the adaptation and *mise-en-scene* took for its model that most American of all theatrical forms, the Broadway musical, and openly flirted with the famous *Phantom of the Opera* which Subhi had watched, greatly admired and wanted to emulate. Unable to shake off the memory of the American *Phantom*, he conjured it up here in the form of a dictatorial director who falls in love with a much younger showgirl, leads her to stardom in the face of fierce opposition from the *primadonna* or the company, and kills her when he discovers that she loves another. This new phantom is allowed to roam freely, overtake the plot, the relations of the characters, and even repeat the famous scene in which he causes a huge chandelier to suddenly

drop and crash down near the audience. With *Phantom*, impersonated by Subhi, on the rampage, the *Carmen* plot was seriously disrupted, lost all coherence, and was often forgotten. When it was remembered, it was suddenly dragged in, in a ridiculously haphazard fashion, used as an excuse for dances and soon forgotten again. The most striking example of this is the scene in which two drug smugglers suddenly materialise out of the blue, and barge into the company director's room in search of Carmen. I was quite startled when I suddenly heard her confess that she had dabbled in drug-trafficking during a spell as a dancer in a disreputable nightclub! The play was nearly halfway through and we had not been given an inkling that she had such interesting skeletons in the cupboard. The scene ends with the director volunteering to do the risky job for her out of love and walking off with the contraband and the two smugglers. I waited in suspense for the outcome of this dangerous escapade; but I could wait till doomsday. Neither the smugglers, nor Carmen's sensational past were ever mentioned or even obliquely alluded to again. The whole episode (obviously an afterthought intended to remind the audience of the opera's plot by clumsily introducing a detail from it in the mainstream of the *Phantom* plot) was completely forgotten, as if it had never happened. It remained an irritating loose end, dangling with others in the foreground and confusing our perception.

Merging plots from different sources is an old and legitimate dramaturgical practice, and popular theatre usually thrives on a number of hackneyed, well-worn, and well tried plots which are occasionally put in the mixer and beaten together. In the case of Subhi's *Carmen*, no such beating and blending took place. The different elements remained separate with the result that the performance seemed to be constantly

swinging and jumping between three different plans, or trying to move in three different directions all at once – Bizet's *Carmen*, *Phantom of the Opera*, and a political allegory about dictatorship. The marriage of all three could have been managed, but it required the ministration of a gifted and skilfull dramaturge of El-Ramli's calibre.

In its present condition, the play comes across as a confusing, discordant jumble of audio-visual impressions which keep wrenching the viewer from one frame of reference to another without a moment's notice; one often felt at a loss where to situate the action and characters, and could not tell whether the setting was Cairo, Seville, or New York. I realize how much effort and hard work went into the making of this recklessly ambitious production. And if the outcome is not what one had anticipated and hoped for, in live theatre it is never too late to try to put things right or minimise the faults. Thank God theatre is a living, changing thing.

O, What a Lovely Miser

An AUC production of Moliere's *L'Avare*, at the Wallace*

Even if you like Moliere in any production, which I do not, you will have to admit that he has never been presented to better advantage in Egypt than in the recent AUC production of *The Miser* if you have been lucky enough to see it. The vibrancy and youthful gusto of the performers were guided by a keen sense of the highly conscious theatricalism that is fused into their roles. They acted openly to the audience, adressing their lines directly to them, and utilized eye-contact, gesture, and occasional physical forays into the auditorium to draw them into the boisterous hilarity of the masquarade on stage.

Guided (I presume) by the few remaining examples of Moliere's stage directions, sadly never printed, director Paul T. Mitri realised the degree to which he used gesture to comic effect, and therefore supplemented the verbal text with a richly imaginative gestural parallel. Not only did it contribute many a delicious lightning flash of parody and irony, it also brought the play much nearer our time and the sensibility of young people today. One particularly refreshing example was the physical reinterpretation of the stylised romantic love scene between Elise and Valere which opens the play; in the production it was accompanied by pronounced indications of suppressed libidinous passion culminating in lusty love-making behind a sofa. The robust

* 22.4.2001. In English.

physicality of this new Elise (played with zest by Suzette Swanson), which delightfully counterpointed Valere's, or Hani Eskandar's demure, almost feminine coy reserve, burst forth once more with sizzling hilairty in her angry defiance of her father's plans to marry her off to the rich, aged Anselme which took the form of a furious fencing match in which she used her pink parasol against his walking stick.

Swanson also served as an amusing foil to her lanky, languid, famininely bedecked brother, Cleante, and managed, together with Nadine Khadr (as the feline, predatory and garishly made-up Frosine), Sara El-Sayed (masquarading as Cleante's male servant, La Fleche), and Mariam Abou Oaf (as Marianne), to suggest a modern feminist approach to Moliere's comic archetypes. Indeed, in terms of its visual impact, the whole production tended to posit women as the only force capable of opposing Harpagon's rapacious will. Apart from the inspired casting of a young woman as the crafty La Fleche, Mitri made her don a medieval suit of armour prior to her walking in triumphantly with Harpagon's hidden treasure. And when this suit of armour, complete with axe and vizor, which we had taken for a simple ornament, part of the decor of Harpagon's house, sprang into life and started to move of its own accord, it was a thrilling *coup de theatre*.

Mitri's imaginative energy and power of innovation were also manifest in the complex and intricately detailed gestural pattern he devised for Harpagon and Karim Bishay accepted the challenge and acquitted himself superbly. Equally exuberant and perfectly timed was Hassan Kreidli's performance as Harpagon's cook and coachman, Omar Kandil's Cleante, particularly in the second part, Hani Eskander's

studiedly cool Valere, and even the minor parts were performed with sparkling wit and great precision. Indeed the acting was the major strength and source of excitement in this production and it was a real treat for Egyptian audiences to be able at last to watch a classic as it was originally written, free of the curse of 'adaptation' which has been dogging the Egyptian theatre since the 1970s.

Travelling light:
Voyageur sans Bagages at the AUC*

Two years ago, scriptwriter Magdy Saber treated us over the whole month of Ramadan to a mushy local TV version of Jean Anouilh's *Voyageur sans Bagages*, rechristened *The Other Man*. The less than 3-hour play was blown out of all reasonakle proportions into a meandering 31-episode soap opera, stuffed to bursting point with melodramatic events, suspenseful twists and turnings and sensational discoveries. The whole was covered with a thick layer of traditional morality, liberally sprinkled with sexual shenanigans and romantic escapades and doused with generous ladlings of salty tears.

The amnesiac hero, (Gaston, was now a middle-aged former philanderer and business shark, with an unconscionable wife who goes mad at the end, a greedy, unscrupulous son who gets himself killed by a gang, and a soppy, weepy daughter, left to pick up the pieces. His catalogue of past sins was altered accordingly; instead of sleeping around, seducing maids, swindling an old friend of the family, killing birds and squirrels and willfully causing a friend a permanent spinal injury by throwing him over the stairs, it now listed adultery, a second, secret marriage (followed by a third contracted while in his new, amnesiac persona), embezzling company funds and framing an innocent colleague (with a mentally handicapped son to boot) for the theft, shady transactions and criminal business deals.

It is difficult to imagine any sane person sticking this rambling epic till the end had it not been for the casting of Nur El-Sherif in the starring

* 8.11.2001. In English.

role. His superb acting managed to give body to this formless mess and even inject it with a degree of credibility. Indeed, I suspect that the whole idea of this squelchy Egyptianised version originated with El-Sherif himself. Like most actors, he has a great admiration for Anouilh's ability to create stormy confrontations, heart-wrenching situations and parts that actors generally can get their teeth into. As a student at the Theatre Institute in the 1960s, he did *Beckett ou l'Honneur de Dieu* for his graduation project and has hankered after *Traveller* ever since.

El-Sherif was absolutely right in thinking that *Traveller*, like most of Anouilh's work, could easily adapt to the small screen. Despite the outward polish, the witty dialogue and the element of social satire targeted at the hackneyed values of the French upper classes (which invests the first act with so much humour and vitality), the secret of the play's wide, popular appeal probably lies in the author's cunning and sophisticated use of melodrama to reach a broader, middle-brow audience. He produced finely-crafted plays which, however, still retained the form's tried-and-true characteristics, eschewing moral ambiguities and subtle ethical distinctions, while avoiding grossly vulgarized sentiments. The serious life choices they posited through the protagonists seldom undermined in any serious way the audience's expectations or questioned the dominant value-system. No wonder that both the Egyptian stage and film versions of his *La Sauvage*, starring Sohair El-Bably and Soad Husni respectively, were such huge successes.

This brings the whole problem of last week's AUC production of *Voyageur sans Bagages* into focus. Although it is, of course, grossly

unfair to compare any younger actor with experienced veteran Nur El-Sherif or, indeed, El-Bably or Husni, the acting proved the Achilles heel of that production; instead of covering up the flaws in the text, it went a long way towards exposing them. For once Anouilh's well-hidden, possibly unconscious, masculine bias and faint, unsavoury misogyny, became glaringly obvious, an ironic and unintended bonus for a critic. Mahmoud El-Lozy's fine direction notwithstanding, it was not perhaps such a good idea entrusting a text written for seasoned actors to budding performers still trying to find their feet. With a stronger Gaston who could get across to us more vividly the character's poignant, childlike vulnerability and bewilderment, and more proficient actresses who could fill in the gaps, we would not perhaps have noticed how utterly negative, unsympathetic and thoroughly irredeemable the female characters really are. Instead, this production's Gaston (Ashod Toumayants) reveals his mother, Madame Renauld (Nadia Idle), as a proud, callous woman who betrays the male ideal of the selfless, all-giving and all-forgiving mother ("You should have grovelled... You did wrong not to go down on your knees", Gaston tells her), his sister-in-law and former mistress, Valentine (Jasmine Sobhy), as an insatiable, unrepentant, multiple adulteress who trades in her body in a loveless marriage, his patroness, the Duchess (Heba Morayef) as a selfish, snobbish featherbrain who pursues charitable causes for self-aggrandizement, and Juliette, the maid he seduces in the past (Lulie El-Ashry), as a deceitful, lascivious, vain female who feeds off pulp fiction and reels it off to impress her lovers. With the whole female species discredited in the play, appearing pathetic at best, no wonder Gaston's salvation becomes an all-male undertaking. First, his angelic, if somewhat stodgy brother, George (Sherif Nakhla), absolves him of

his past sins on the grounds that he was a "lonely, fatherless boy" who lacked guidance, and takes all the blame on the family; then his ticket to a new life appears, in a kind of *deus ex machina*, in the form of a little boy (Ahmed El-Lozy) who has conveniently lost his entire family. Having laid the ghost of his young self to rest, Gaston is at liberty to embark on a new role as a good father in a setup blissfully free of pesky females. The play ends with three generations of males — Gaston, the boy, and the boy's aged lawyer — sailing off to a new life.

Having said this, the performance was not without its merits. For one thing, it gave us the first production in Egypt of Anouilh's original text. The young cast struggled valiantly with difficult parts, and — considering that English was not their mother tongue — generally acquitted themselves better than many professional actors of their generation in Egypt. There was a moment when Toumayants as Gaston became quite touching, namely the scene when he stood among all the dead, stuffed animals and birds — relics of and mute testimony to his ugly past self — with his hands deep in his pockets, staring into space. Nadia Idle too, as the mother, particularly in her final confrontation with her son, contrived to infuse her character with a measure of credibility and make her sympathetic, contrary to Anouilh's intentions and despite Gaston's hectoring. The minor characters, all types, had an easier task and managed to bring a breath of comedy and vivacity to the stage. El-Lozy's choice of music created a kind of wistful period atmosphere and a nostalgic mood, while Stancil Campbell's elegant, uncluttered two-level set, with its sensitively matched colours and lighting created a visual metaphor for Gaston's situation and bodied forth the texture of feeling underlying the play. In a stroke of brilliance, El-Lozy and Campbell put Gaston's room up above the living-room on

the lower level, which after the initial scene remained darkened for most of the play, making it seem as though the hero's private space was suspended above a dark void, without roots or anchor. The characters who visited him up there seemed to materialise out of the darkness and melt back into it, which made them seem more like memories surfacing out of a distant past. And when the ground level was finally lighted at the end, for the hero to make his exit, it had a strong, meaningful impact.

Carry on Laughing

Paul Mitri's *Moliere* at the AUC*

One afternoon at Cambridge university, during an international summer seminar on literature in the mid 1990s, British novelist Margaret Drabble, who had recently taken up writing biographies instead of novels, was asked by one of the guest scholars how much fiction goes into the writing of other people's lives, or indeed of one's own. With biographies as with historical novels, she said, the subject had to be scrupulously researched; one had to stick to the facts, verify persons, dates and places. In a biography, however, one was not free to invent incident and character. Nevertheless, in the best biographies, like Peter Ackroyd's of Charles Dickens and T.S. Eliot, she added, one found a lot of fiction, if by fiction one understands the actual art of writing, the organisation of the material, the analysis of character and motive and the interpretation of actions and deeds. A novelist, she asserted, cannot help but bring her writing skills, intelligence and experience to bear on her material when doing a biography; inevitably, therefore, and however objective and detached she consciously tries to be, the work becomes her own reading of someone else's life and, as such, as much a reflection of her as of her subject. In the final analysis, she concluded, a biography is but one among many possible narratives, all valid, but none absolutely definitive — one version of a complex truth that no one can ever fully encompass even when all the facts have been recorded.

* 22.5.2003. In English.

The truth of Drabble's insight was brought home to me once more by Paul Mitri's *Moliere* — an original dramatic account of the life, times and art of Jean-Baptiste Poquelin (otherwise known as Moliere) which he directed for the AUC performing arts department and was shown at Al-Falaki Centre last week. Beginning at the end, at the moment of Moliere's death after a performance of *Le Malade Imaginaire*, the play takes the form of a long flashback which traces, like a *Bildungsroman*, the hero's formative years and development, through a turbulent professional career with many ups and downs, into a great all-round *homme de theatre* — actor, dramatist, theatre manager and the equivalent of a modern director.

Except for the imagined (but quite plausible) early association between the Italian commedia dell'arte artist, Tiberio Fiorelli (alias Scaramouche, with whom Moliere shared the Theatre du Petit-Bourbon, near the Louvre for a season in 1658 by an order of the king) and the 20 year old Jean-Baptiste sometime before 1643, of which I could find no record, or allowing the Prince de Conti to inveigh against theatre, berate Moliere for immoral doings and accuse him of atheism to his face in 1657 rather than in a written treatise (*Traite de la comedie*) in 1666, Mitri's new play observes strict historical veracity and presents the facts in their proper chronological order. At no point, however, does it come across as the work of a detached observer. Like the finest biographical dramas about artists — e.g. Edna O'Brien's *Virginia* (which focuses on the famous novelist's mental state before her suicide and her relationships with Vita Sackville-West and her husband, Leonard Woolf), Terry Eagleton's *Saint Oscar* (which replays Oscar Wilde's notorious trial), Jean Paul Sartre's *Kean* (where the early 19th Century great Shakespearean actor, Edmund Kean, is pictured as a

romantic, almost Byronic hero and the object of high society's fascination and horror), Edward Bond's account of Shakespeare's mood in his last years in Stratford in *Bingo*, Pam Gems' portrait of Edith Piaf in *Piaf*, or Peter Shaffer's of Mozart in *Amadeus* — *Moliere* is consistently informed with passionate admiration and warm affection for its subject. Though it never turns a blind eye to his faults and failings, these are always viewed with profound sympathetic understanding and presented with tolerant, loving humour.

The message (if one can call it that) that one carries away from the performance tells you as much about Mitri as Moliere. It speaks of a passionate theatre-lover, with boundless creative energy, who cannot survive away from the boards, the paint-boxes and tiring-rooms and only finds his freedom, fulfillment and sense of integrity there, but knows full well that theatre is a risk-all game and that the only way to get there and stay there is through dedication, hard work, discipline and responsible choice. A man who is fully aware of the dangers and threats that beset his profession, escpecially in our part of the world, and is anxious to alert us to them and determined to defend it to the end. An artist who knows in his bones that since theatre is heightened reality, a mask which speaks the truth, it cannot bear pretension, affectation, or lying in any form and who loathes and ridicules any division between popular and elitist, low and high culture. Popular forms — cinema, television and musical comedy — as well as the older slapstick farce, burlesque sketch, or comic strip, are for Mitri as much legitimate sources of inspiration as classical, or Shakespearean drama and baroque music.

The Moliere we come across in Mitri's play can be cowardly and callous at times, mercenary, hypocritical, rash, vain or fulsomely fawning on royalty and the aristocracy at others. But this is the man. Against him, Mitri sets the artist, his talent, perseverance and many painful sacrifices; his proficiency, single-minded dedication to his profession and honest recognition of his shortcomings; above all his ardent passion for theatre and fascination with the art of performance. And the artist more than redeems the man. What unites Moliere the man and Moliere the artist and ultimately reconciles them is a profound faith, shared by both, in the corrective and healing power of laughter. Without the ability to laugh at himself and his misfortunes, the man could have hardly survived; and it is this quality which endears him to us and makes us forgive him. For the artist, on the other hand, laughter spells hard work and knowledge – the need to "hone ... skills to precision" and to closely observe and empathize. As master Fiorelli tells the apprentice Jean-Baptiste: it is easy to criticise or satirise; but to mock, one needs to thoroughly know and rehearse in one's body and imagination the intended object of one's mockery. For the artist in the play, laughter is also a road to truth, a ripper of masks, a symbol of rebellion, a test of intelligence, an antidote to bigotry and fanaticism, a liberation and celebration of life's energy and the most effective weapon the weak, poor and marginalised can wield in the face of coercive authority and social injustice.

The contrast between the two sides of Moliere, the man and the artist, which acts as generative matrix in this text, is thematically replayed in his dual – personal/professional – relationships first with

Madeleine then Armande Bejart, and has given the play a highly theatrical structure based on the alternation and juxtaposition of dramatised biographical material with famous scenes from the plays – namely, *The Imaginary Invalid, The Flying Doctor, Sganarelle or the Imaginary Cuckold, The Affected Ladies, School for Wives and Tartuffe*. In the setting too, as indicated by the stage directions in the text, and, therefore, visually, in performance, fact and fiction, life and art are craftily contrasted in the twin identity of the stage and its constant redefinition as either real/virtual space, or fictional backstage (out of view of a fictional 17th century audience but in full view of a real one) cum actual performance space, facing a real audience (us), cast in the role of a 17th Century fictional one while preserving our temporal, contemporary status. The principle of contrast which dominates the structure, the central (Moliere-Madeleine-Armande) romantic interest and the handling of real/imagined, actor/spectator space in the play, extends to the characterisation and thematic patterning of the material, spawning a series of contrasting pairs or groups: the Poquelins/the Bejarts, Louis XIV/the Prince de Conti, Tiberio Fiorelli/Dominico Biancolelli, the liberal court/the stuffy church, la Troupe du Roi/the company of the Hotel de Bourgogne, the aristocracy/the middle classes and tradesmen represented by M. Poquelin, Mlle. De Scudery/Mme. De Rambouillet, the absent Comte de Modene/the Marquis who courts Armande's favour near the end and, of course, Paris versus the provinces and tragedy versus the commedia dell'arte. This intricate web of interrelated contrasts defines the world of the play into which the young prospective lawyer, Jean-Baptiste Poquelin, is pitched and has to

sacrifice everything — family, title, social status, financial security and even his name and become a nonentity and an outcast — in order to recreate himself as the great Moliere we know. Torn between conflicting interests and forces — personal, professional and political — he seems like a man juggling so many balls all at once and careful not to drop any as he edges his way forward, trying to keep his balance.

In the writing, Mitri set himself a similar challenge — to juggle so many thematic balls, all at the same time, without letting any drop. As the play progressed, and the balls — the vital relationships and focal conflicts in Moliere's life — multiplied, the challenge grew, becoming more intense. But at no time did Mitri relent, allow his attention and concentration to waver, or opt for an easy way out. Up until the end, we were kept suspensefully watching him juggling Moliere's relationships with Madeleine Bejart and her sister against those with the king, the court, the church, the debtors, the audience, high society, his own actors, vicious professional rivals, old masters and mentors, and even his long, estranged father. It was a masterful authorial feat only paralleled by his dexterity in managing his actors.

As much of the loving care, precision and meticulous attention to detail that went into the writing of the text was lavished on the young AUC performers who had to juggle parts around as fast as Mitri juggled themes and scenes and Moliere juggled balls. Imagine a cast of nine, doing thirty-seven different characters (the same number as Moliere's plays) in a story which spans forty years and having to constantly change costume, accent, tone and gait at breakneck speed. Nothing

could be more demanding, even for a seasoned, professional troupe. Like the young Poquelin in the play, Mitri is a reckless optimist, and in his case, as in Moliere's, it paid. But it took hard work and months of arduous training and endless rehearsals to hone the skills of the cast to precision — as Moliere did with his troupe before leaving the provinces for Paris. One could not believe it when at the end of the show only nine actors came on to take their bows. Of the nine, only Luke Lehner (as Moliere) and Lulie El-Ashry (as Madeleine Bejart) had one character to tackle, but doubling and trebling in parts seemed mandatory for all. In their case, neither the temporal scope of the play nor its structural juxtaposition of biographical data with scenes from the plays allowed any respite. They had always to be alert to the changes that come with aging as their characters moved from twenty to thirty to fifty and, at the same time, move over into Moliere's fictional world at a moment's notice to impersonate his characters. To make it more physically taxing and nerve-racking (and not just for the actors, but for the work team behind the scenes as well) Mitri insisted on fast changes, split-second timing and an overall galloping rhythm. The play wouldn't have worked otherwise. The wonder of it is that none of the young nine actors slipped or showed signs of strain. Lehner was stunning, consistently effervescent and unfailingly versatile; El-Ashry was lovabe, credible and deeply moving; Asser Yassin handled both Poquelin pére and Louis XIV with competence; Ratko Ivekovic was magnificent as the Italian comedian Fiorelli and superbly funny as La Grange and Sahdi Alfons gave a delightful, concise and sharply-delineated caricature of Dufresne, the director of the travelling company

Moliere and his actors join after the failure of their Illustre theatre. Equally zestful, colourful and superbly executed were Mariam Ali Mahmoud's Mme. De Rambouillet, Dalia El-Guindy's Mlle. De Scudery, Noha El-Nahas's capricious, giddy Armande Bejart and Hani Seif's early Bernier and later Prince de Conti. Hand in hand with Mitri, Heidi Hoffer (the scenery/light designer), Carrie Lawrence (costume designer), Ramsi Lehner (sound designer), Hoda Baraka (stage manager), Hazem Shebl (technical director) and an army of assistants, those wonderfully dedicated, hardworking young people gave a passionate homage not only to Moliere but to theatre, past and present, and to every member of the thespian tribe.

Poetry of Horror

Two French Dance Shows at Al-Gomhoria*

The 5th Festival for Contemporary Dance: Egypt-France 2004 caught me in the middle of heavy exam duties and long, tedious physiotherapy sessions. The ankle I had badly fractured in a car crash last March still hurt and the trip to Gomhoria theatre in a battered taxi, alternately rattling and coughing, was painful and costly. The choice of date too, 5th June, was far from happy — the sad anniversary of the beginning of the disastrous six-day war in 1967. It brings with it bad memories — booming sirens, the din of airplanes overhead, the sound of distant and nearby explosions, images of gutted out military airports and vast stretches of sand, littered with bloody corpses, torn off limbs and burnt-out human remains. Many people, including myself, do their best to avoid 5th June when it comes to doing anything of importance or holding a festive gathering.

Curiously, the opening performance, *May B*, by Compagnie de Maguy Marin, seemed particularly suited to the sombre mood of the day and its painful memories. Created on 4 November 1981 at the Theatre Municipal d'Angers, it recreates in visual, kinetic terms the dismal, nihilistically reductive view of human existence embedded in the dramatic works of Samuel Beckett. The empty stage, strewn with dust or ashes, eerily lit and framed in black, vividly evokes the setting and atmosphere of *Waiting for Godot*, *Endgame* and a host of other plays — a "grey, zero" world, as Clov says, "Light black. From pole to pole"

* 1.7.2004.

— and the figures which occupy that dreary, hopeless landscape seem like replications of Winnie and Willie, Vladimir and Estragon, Pozzo and Lucky, Hamm and Clov and Nagg and Nell — all drawn from their respective darknesses and thrown together, like specks, into a timeless, murky void.

Outwardly, however, by virtue of their costumes, movement and make-up, Marin's dancers looked more grotesque, more repulsive and pathetic than what Beckett's characters usually look on stage. Their collective image in the first part of the performance presents them as a weird group of dazed, deformed humans, in white face, with false noses and black blotches for eyes, dressed like the inmates of a concentration camp or a 19th century lunatic asylum. In their shroud-like uniforms, they look like ridiculous moving corpses, freshly released from the grave and doomed to crawl and grub in an eternal, twilight desert, somewhere between life and death. They slouch, huddle together and shuffle around in circles, raising clouds of dust; at intervals, they break into bouts of awkward, clumsy, frenzied dancing at the abrupt sounding of a military march. In the second part, a variation on the first (which appears in retrospect as the negative of the picture we now see), they appear in warmer lighting and modern dress (vaguely 1940s' shabby-genteel style) and look like a group of travellers with suitcases, marching rigidly in line and trying hard to stick to the outward forms of respectability despite the rigours of the journey.

On and on they march, with a snatch of a song monotonously repeated at the back, over and over, like a broken record. Round and round they go, into the darkness at the back then out into the light, never varying their pace, though varying their number with each circle.

Sometimes, only one or two emerge, circle the stage, then disappear. For seconds the stage is empty and you think this is the end; but, no; others come back to repeat the sequence. The journey seems endless and, indeed, *May B* cannot be said to have a proper ending. When the lights finally come down on a man, holding a suitcase and poised to take another step forward along the same absurd route, it seems an arbitrary decision; whether we see them or not, the travellers will keep on journeying into the dark and back, alternately changing their clothing, as they did before. Far from constituting an end, the blackout seems a momentary interruption and the final image leaves you expecting the show will either resume or begin all over again. It amounts to the same thing, since both parts are variations on the same theme. As soon as this lone figure disappears, his companions, one feels certain, will begin to crawl out into the light once more, dressed as travellers or in shrouds, and continue the senseless actions.

Marin did not need to trot out Ham on his wheelchair, with Clov stiffly beside him, or Pozzo dragging Lucky at the end of a rope tied round his neck to tell us that we were in Beckett bleak land. His unrelenting nihilism, obsessive dwelling on the sick and ugly and gruesome sense of humour could be felt everywhere and permeated every detail. Indeed, *May B* could be accurately described as an extended, imaginative illustration of Beckett's famous dictum that we are born across the grave. Marin's challenge, it seems, was to capture the flash of pale light, the physical tension and painful, ungainly twitchings and convulsions which mark this fleeting moment of suspension as we slip out of one dark hole and into another. The secret was to avoid beauty, the traditional aesthetics of dance at all costs, explore the body in states of immobility, deformity, paralysis or lack of

coordination and from there construct a startling choreographic vocabulary made up of the body's crude, banal or vulgar gestures and movements in moments of pain and weakness and states of stressful waiting or forced action.

The second production in the festival, Josef Nadj's *Woyzeck*, was another classic of European contemporary dance, though younger than *May B* by about thirteen years, and also with a literary source — Buchner's unfinished play of the same title. Here, the grey which had enveloped the vision of human life in *May B* deepened to lurid black and Buchner's characters, who had precariously hovered on the edge of humanity in the play, were shown here as having finally taken an irreversible leap into the downright monstrous. Crowded into a cramped, cluttered, rotting set, oozing sordidness and filth in every inch, they struck me as the morbid creations of a sick mind — sinister travesties of humans, vicious and mechanical, with enormous, destructive energies, cannibalistic tastes and nechrophiliac appetites. Apart from the one female figure, Buchner's Marie, here made into a dummy then a corpse, the characters took turns at playing torturer and victim, grotesquely savaging each other and sometimes their own bodies, with the violence reaching a nauseating level at one point, as one of them slits open his belly, drags out his liver, a real, brown-red, quivering piece of liver, takes a slice off with a knife and bites into it before offering it to the audience.

This coming on top of scenes which featured vomiting, breaking raw eggs and letting the contents dribble to the floor or fiercely rubbing them into the surface of a rusty metal table, dancing around with a corpse then making love to it, as well as a character tearing a chunk of

flesh (a real piece of raw meat) off another's back and proceeding to munch it with gloulish pleasure, sent one of the audience running and retching out of the auditorium the night I was there while the rest of us groaned in disgust or giggled nervously. Nadj's *Woyzeck* seemed to revel in pain, filth and violence and conducted its morbid display of them coolly, against Aldar Racz's music which clearly parodied the musical tracks familiar in silent movies. And not only the music, but the stiff, abrupt movement of the characters, their senseless, arbitrary actions, the excessive, farcical physical battering, as well as the lighting, the framing of the action and performance space and the seating of the audience on tiers on stage all conspired to create a faint, mocking illusion of watching an old, silent movie. Were we supposed to receive all that horror on stage in the same spirit and even laugh at it? Why not, the show seemed to answer; you are fed similar horrors through the media on a daily basis without turning a hair. All one requires is a really strong stomach and plenty thick skin. Gone are the days when such horrors could be blithely brushed off as impossible fabrications and confidently consigned to the realm of the fantastic.

Grimmer, more chilling and graphically violent than *May B*, Nadj's *Woyzeck* seemed more intent on eschewing anything remotely resembling what normally passes for dance and beauty. Both were drastically redefined here in the light of a new aesthetic — an aesthetic of the ugly and repulsive, of horrified fascination born out of deep revulsion. Artists have been known to sift through mounds of rubbish and come up with odd assortments of human refuse which are then knocked into some sort of shape and presented to the public as artifacts. Underlying such efforts is the claim that form sublimates the material however base. In Nadj's *Woyzeck*, however, the material seemed to

mock any formal transcendental activity and to drag me deeper into the muck of despair. It reminded me of the debate surrounding war photography which Susan Sontag thoughtfully examines in her book *Regarding the Pain of Others*. The more superiour the photographer, the more horrifying the images s/he produces. What do such images do to us as they stream through the media while we bite into our breakfast of dip into our lunch? Do they put us off our food? Make us angry? Goad us to action? Or do they simply habituate us to horror and thicken our skin?

If *May B* left many of the festival audience marvelling at the direction contemporary dance has taken and wondering whether the body in pain, debased and shorn of all grace, has become its object, *Woyzeck* seemed to call into question the very the meaning of dance, beauty, and art. Such concepts, many felt, needed drastic rethinking. That it is by far the most shocking, provocative, and disorienting foreign show to have visited Egypt ever, or at least as far as I can remember, is perhaps the reason why Walid Aouni, the president of the festival, brought it over and, perhaps, one should thank him for it. But watching it within a day of *May B* was like being dragged into a slaughter house after having been taken for a stroll round a cemetery with open graves. It was all too much and left one reeling. Fortunately, the Egyptian contributions were more merciful to the audience and not quite bereft of hope.

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German

Viva Eva

Eva-Maria Lerchenberg-Tony's theatre workshop at Al-Hanager*

It was not just another theatre workshop. Several foreign artists of international renown, including the inimitable Jozef Szajna, have been invited to Cairo in recent years to communicate their valuable experience to young Egyptian artists within the same framework. But for Hoda Wasfi, the director of Al-Hanager Arts Centre, the Eva-Maria Lerchenberg-Thony dance-theatre workshop gave tangible, indisputable validation for her policy of intensive cultural interaction and exposure.

For the 40 young men and women (all drawn from the Egyptian theatrical fringe) it was a process of self-discovery, a real rebirth. After six weeks of gruelling work, lasting six or seven hours every blessed day of the week, excepting Fridays, they all felt more at home with their bodies and in the world. Hani El-Mettenawy, a young PT instructor and a member of the Sharpnel Free Theatre Group, told me: "There was never any grand abstract talk, no theorisation. She simply showed us what our bodies were capable of: stunningly complex movement. We thought we could never manage them; but she never doubted we could. She gave us confidence and strength and set about analysing them, step by step, teaching us all the time about rhythm and feeling, motive and provocation."

Mona Prince, another member of Shrapnel says: "This workshop has affected all areas of my life. I move, walk and talk differently.

* 29.2.1996.

When I do belly-dancing now I am always aware of form, muscle control and body discipline. It saves on energy. No waste there."

Another member of the group, Maher Sabry, a self-styled Christ-figure, had a temperature of forty on the last demonstration performance, but rather than let himself be coerced into staying in bed, he bounced onto stage, interminably warning his dancing partners to mind his dripping nose. When I went backstage at the end to congratulate Eva-Maria (as she came to be affectionately called by everybody at Al-Hanager, including the cafeteria staff), I found her caught in a warm, glowing whirlpool of tears, hugs and laughter; then, suddenly, someone cheered 'Viva Eva', sparking off a chant that filled the whole place. The occasion also coincided with her birthday, but the superstitious side of me told me it was no coincidence. When a young, self-effacing female artist pushed into my hands a lovely bunch of pink carnations given to her by her lover on St Valentine's Day, asking me urgently to give it to Eva, I was almost sure it was no coincidence. I had forgotten it was also St Valentine's Day.

My daughter always warns me against 'gushing'; but in the presence of Eva-Maria (and never mind the surname — with a first name that combines Eve and Miriam who needs it?) how could anyone help it? "She came, saw, and conquered" would be a terribly 'gushing' way to describe what she has done. But to say "she came, saw and loved and in loving she departed having become richer for the experience" would be nearer the truth — though equally full of gush. Eva-Maria Lerchenberg-Thony loved her workshop members as much as they loved her; more importantly, she respected them as artists, even though some of them came to her completely innocent of any

knowledge or experience of the bare rudiments of dance, forcing her to start from "below zero", as she puts it. The six weeks' work was only an initiation process and she is planning to come back next year and build on it. The 40 member group have already decided to stick together and continue training along the lines she laid and wait for her.

I attended a few of Eva-Maria Lerchenberg-Thony's training sessions before talking to her and every time she reminded me of a yogi. Even before she told me, I had guessed she was an idealist, and known that however eclectic in her styles and sources she would have no truck with the cynical, disruptive gimmicks of postmodernism. Her response to the world is basically romantic, albeit with a good measure of classical austerity and self-discipline. Questioned about her style, she quotes Garcia Lorca's famous saying: "I do not care if what I do is old or new so long as it is me." She passionately believes in the expressive power of movement, in its ability to communicate not simply moods and feelings but states of being. Her body language may be conventional in vocabulary, drawing on classical ballet, modern and Asian dance, but her syntax is all her own and has a pronounced mystical tone.

Her interpretation of Georg Buchner's *Woyzeck* (which provided the framework for her Egyptian workshop), with music by the French composer Réné Aubry, took the form of a series of epiphanies. It was vastly different from the stunning piece she brought to Cairo in 1989 — an interpretation of Sartre's *Huis Clos* — which enraptured everybody and was voted by the international jury and the Egyptian critics the best show of the Cairo International Festival for Experimental Theatre that year. Whereas *Huis Clos* was frenziedly passionate and aggressively

sensual, *Woyzeck* was predominantly lyrical in a tragic vein. Both, however, displayed that effective mixture of rigorous sophistication and extreme accessibility which marks all this choreographer's work.

She usually prefers to base her work on a familiar literary text, perhaps to give the viewer the security of a safe anchor and allow him or her to venture more freely with her on her daring aesthetic and emotional explorations of the unspoken realms. In this case the text was German, but she pared it down to its universal core. Nevetheless, she regrets that she did not spend enough time on studying Egyptian modes of physical expression before embarking on her workshop. Certain movements we are all born with, she says "and I try to use these as much as possible. The rest are culturally determined. After I walked about the streets of Cairo and watched the way people carry their bodies and express themselves I thought that if I ever do a workshop here again, I am going to do it differently. I would also use a text from this culture. It would be very interesting." She rubbed her hands in excitement as she said the last sentence.

About the future of dance theatre in Egypt and, indeed, all over the world, she is extremely optimistic. "Body language is universal", she says emphatically, leaving no room for further arguments. What about body taboos and the human voice? Pure voice, not words, she welcomes and often uses in her theatre; as for taboos, it is the function of dance theatre to overcome them and free the human body. The company she founded in the late eighties, the Tanz-Tanztheter Munchen, was multinational and her Egyptian students gave her no trouble over taboos. In fact she found them more pliant and malleable than her German trainees.

Before we parted, she commented admiringly on the deep sense of commitment to the work her group showed and when I told her that part of it was due to the fact that most of them had watched and loved her *Huis Clos* back in 1989, she rubbed her hands gleefully flashing at me that wonderful smile of hers.

Eva-Maria Lerchenberg-Thony came to Cairo from her home town, Innsbruck, where she had been director of ballet at the Tiroler Landestheater since 1992. When she left Cairo for her new post as director of the dance department at the Shadttheater Augsburg, she had already made this city of ours her second home town.

Poetry of Paradox

Schlomer's *Highland* at the National theatre*

Our National Theatre is celebrating its 60th birthday this year. In a warm and generous gesture, the Goethe Institute in Cairo has decided to honour the occasion and present all Egyptian theatre-lovers with the rare opportunity of enjoying a production by one of the most talented and interesting choreographers of the younger generation in Europe today. Joachim Schlomer may be only 33 (he was born in Monheim, near Cologne in 1962), but he has already made his mark on the European choreography scene and won a prestigious reputation. Significantly, too, the visiting production comes from The German National Theatre of Weimar, one of the oldest and most important theatres in Germany. Founded in 1791 as the "Court Theatre" of Karl August, the famous Grand-Duke of Weimar, it was headed from its foundation until 1817 by no lesser figure than the great Goethe himself, and it was there that most of this poet's major plays, together with those of his contemporary Friedrich Schiller premiered.

At the press conference, last Thursday at the National, many were surprised by the extremely youthful appearance of Herr Schlomer and could not reconcile it with the resumé they had read of his rich and varied artistic career or with his position as director and choreographer of the dance theatre at the German National Theatre of Weimar. In Egypt, we are not used to young people wielding authority or holding high managerial posts in the theatre or elsewhere. The National Theatre

* 11.4.1996.

of Weimar, however, seems to follow a policy of constant rejuvenation through young talent, and the work we saw last Friday proves the wisdom of this policy.

To reach his position at the head of one of the four major companies of the National Theatre of Weimar, Herr Schlomer had to travel a long and variegated way. After completing his secondary education, he studied dance and choreography with Hans Zullig, Malou Airaudo and Jean Cebron at the Folkwang School in Essen. During that period too — between 1984 and 1988 — he cultivated other fields of interest including folklore, flamenco and historical dance. He toured eastern Europe in 1987, dancing *Le Sacre du Printemps* with Pina Bausch's Wuppertal Dance Theatre, then joined the Mark Morris Monnaie Dance Group at the Theatre de la Monnaie in Brussels where he remained until 1991. But already, as early as 1984, this talented young artist was choreographing group works for his own dance troupe (Company Josch) together with stage and costume designer Frank Leimbach. His first directorial post came in 1991 when he became director of ballet at the Civic Theatre in Ulm. Three years later, in the autumn of 1994, he moved with his ensemble to the National Theatre in Weimar where he is stationed now, but not for long. Next year will find him with many of his long time dancer colleagues in Basel. Outside Germany, Schlomer worked with a number of ensembles, including the Ballet Royal de Wallonie in Charleroi, where he choreographed *Le Mer En Deux Etages* in 1993, and Mikhail Baryschnikov's White Oak Dance Project for which he choreographed *Blue Heron* in 1993, then *Beyond White Lilies* in the following year.

Schlomer has already 40 dance works to his credit (he describes them as 'choreographies'), and his latest creation, *Highland or The Echo of the Stones (Hochland oder Der Nachhall der Steine)*, which he brought to Cairo is a work of real beauty which combines geometrical rigour with lyrical tenderness. Transposing a work of art from one cultural context into another is usually a risky business; in the case of all dance theatre, however, the risk is lessened by the universal language of movement. Besides, thanks to the Cairo International Festival for Experimental Theatre, Egyptian audiences have been repeatedly exposed to the latest trends in Western theatre and have consequently developed a substantial measure of reception tolerance. Nevertheless, for many, Schlomer's *Highland* proved baffling simply because it lacked a narrative framework and demanded the active engagement of the viewer in constructing the 'meaning' of the work.

Schlomer's creative mode is essentially poetic, not mimetic; he uses movement and the bodies of his dancers to structure space into a series of evocative images and powerful metaphors that cannot be conceptualised in words. Rather than 'express', the movement 'evokes' and the audio-visual impact is tremendous. Through a carefully orchestrated series of paradoxes and contrasts, unfolding in a rich variety of rhythms, including the rhythms of stillness and silence, the work projects a symphony of moods, feelings and states of being — the rich landscapes of a sensitive mind in its complex, poetic response to life and death. The music which 'embraces' (rather than 'accompanies') the visual formation, and which combines traditional Scottish pipes music with Renaissance and Baroque music as well as original compositions, or 'sound-scapes', by Michael von Hintzenstern and Hans Tutschku, contributes vastly, in harmony with the lighting, to

the poetic energy of the work. Here, the soundtrack carries us to the hills of Scotland, to the sea, to the carnival and the market-place, then plunges us into the demonic din of the big city with its roaring traffic before it sends us into the past on the waves of music. But wherever it carries us, and even under the harsh, ruthless glare of the big neon lights, we never lose touch with the magic of poetry. *Highland* may be a difficult and baffling piece, but it makes up for this in terms of beauty and imaginative impact.

Vissi d'Arte

Eva-Maria Lerchenberg-Thony's solo piece *Callas* at Al-Hanager*

Early last year, Austrian-German choreographer and dancer Eva-Maria Lerchenberg-Thony conducted a dance-theatre workshop at Al-Hanager Centre which lasted three weeks. An earlier visit to Egypt in 1989 with her riveting version of Sartre's *Huis Clos* had won her Best Performance from the international jury of the Cairo International Festival for Experimental Theatre and Best Director from the Egyptian critics. She was already a much admired and deeply respected figure when she arrived on her second visit, and by the end of the three weeks she had also secured the warm affection of everyone who came in touch with her. The group she worked with were mostly amateurs, including some who had never had any training in dance, classical or modern. The result, however, a compressed version of Georg Buchner's *Woyzeck* performed on a bare stage, was so stimulating and encouraging that it was decided to pursue the project the following year over a longer period.

At the Goethe Institute, which had co-sponsored the workshop, the group continued to train along the lines she had laid down, and when she arrived on 24 February for the second workshop which, thanks to the contribution of the Austrian Embassy, will last for two months this time, she was pleased to find her pupils in good shape. Originally, Lerchenberg-Thony had wanted to work on Egyptian material and

* 13.3.1997.

decided on two short stories by Latifa El-Zayyat and Alifa Rif'at centering on the relationships of men and women. The idea was to explore with the group the rhythms and modes of physical expression in Egypt and their cultural underpinnings. Unfortunately, the plan ran into difficulties and had to be abandoned. It is now back to *Woyzeck*, in a fuller version this time, and the performance is scheduled for 24 April.

But apart from the valuable work she is currently doing at Al-Hanager (intensive sessions from nine to five, six days a week), Eva-Maria Lerchenberg-Thony gave two performances last week of her latest creation, *Maria Callas*. To describe this work as a dance piece would be inaccurate. It is first and foremost an intensely dramatic work that foregrounds the stunning resources of Lerchenberg-Thony as an actress. Like Chekhov's *The Swan Song*, it is a dramatic study of the plight of the artist as he or she feels the approach of old age and death, the fading away of talent, the decline of fame and the neglect or positive animosity of audiences and former worshippers.

For Lerchenberg-Thony, Callas became the embodiment of this plight. After reading four biographies of the opera singer, she became firmly convinced that it was not a heart attack that put an end to her life at the age of 54: "No. The audience killed her," she stoutly assured me. This ruthless, 'murderous' audience is structured into the work not only through recordings of an audience alternately applauding and hissing and booing in response to the various Callas arias that punctuate the performance, but also through the basic plan of the choreography. The stage is divided into two areas: the back, representing the artist's lonely retreat where she sits, undressed, in a black slip, among the relics of the

past — a few of the sumptuous costumes she once wore in various roles and a pile of old newspapers with reviews of her work together with all the scandalous gossip that once surrounded her. Beyond the line of newspapers lies the public arena with four camera-like spotlights on stands outlining it. There, she re-enacts various moments of her tempestuous career. The key of the compositional pattern was one of advancing and retreating between the two areas in a variety of moods ranging from defiant pride to cringing fear. Alexander Zemlinsky's music provided the perfect accompaniment to these moods, embodying the different shades of feeling.

Eschewing anything obviously sensational or spectacular, Lerchenberg-Thony relied on an almost ascetically limited vocabulary of movement and gesture, drawing mainly upon the expressive power of her face and eyes to engage the audience in the drama and convey meaning. Gradually, as she repeatedly stands downstage, gazing out in bitterness, reproof or defiance at us as the sounds of the hooting, booing, or rapturously applauding audience fills the hall, and by a curious process of transformation we become Callas's audience and share their guilt. It was an invitation to consider the strange and precarious relationship of all performers to all audiences. At the end of the performance, I was almost shy of applauding, having become conscious of myself as part of the amorphous mass that lurks in the dark and whose arbitrary judgemenets can make or break a performer.

Through economy of movement and props, and well-judged use of stillness and silence, Lerchenberg-Thony created a perfect balance between movement and music, allowing Callas's arias their full impact. Judith Wegener's costumes showed a deep understanding of the power

of different fabrics and colours to express mood and feeling. Together with Peter Jeremias's restrained and understated but eloquent lighting, they created an ambiance that partook of the same paradoxical mixture of austere simplicity and sensitive subtlety of Lerchenberg-Thony's performance.

No "stink of dirt and drink"

Eva-Maria Lerchenberg-Thony's dance version of Georg Buchner's *Woyzeck* at Al-Hanager*

If your taste inclines towards the postmodernist in art with its thick ambiguities, disconcerting stylistic shift and ironic twists, then Eva-Maria Lerchenberg-Thony's interpretation of *Woyzeck*, which opened at El-Hanager 26 April, would not be exactly your cup of tea. Her choreographic composition of Buchner's piece (1836), though it occasionally makes use of some of the vocabulary of postmodernist dance, remains closely allied to classical modernist dance in its integral unity and coherence and its striving to express what Martha Graham called 'the inner landscapes' and achieve what Susan Langer described as 'significant form'. There is no trace here (as there were none in her two previous works seen in Cairo: Sartre's *Huis Clos*, or *Geschlossence Gesellschaft*, and *Callas*) of any attempt to baffle the viewers, obstruct or subvert their interpretation of the meaning of what they see, or check their emotional involvement in it. No conflicting perspectives here, paradoxical readings, and not a hint of irony or a whiff of paradoy or humour.

In the interest of dramatic lucidity and force, Lerchenberg-Thony has boldly sacrificed both the thematic density and tonal complexity of Buchner's text and concentrated, almost exclusively, on the eternal triangle at the heart of the play. Woyzeck, his mistress Marie, and her lover, the drum-major, are whisked out of their sordid, bestial and

* 8.5.1997.

grotesque social milieu and projected as elemental forces, archetypes, or pure passions, locked in conflict on a cosmic stage. Even the minor characters are generalised out of recognition and recreated as one big hostile force. This policy resulted in a marked and interesting shift of dramatic focus, making Marie, rather than Woyzeck, the gravitational centre of the performance.

Whether Lerchenberg-Thony meant it or not, this shift of focus had exciting feminist implications. It was as if she had decided to go against the traditional reading of the text and project it from the point of view of the female victim. What engages our emotions here and provides the most stirring and erotic dance sequences is Marie's moral dilemma as she is torn between her overpowering sexual passion for one man and her loyalty and duty to another. In one eloquent sequence she tries to walk out on her husband to follow her lover, but the husband, sprawled on the floor, holds on to her ankles, pinning her to her place; with great effort she frees one foot and lunges forward, but then freezes for a second, panting, looks back, bends down to embrace the husband between her legs while he assumes a foetal position. Indeed, the foetal position was the hallmark of Woyzeck in this production and signalled to the audience not only his helplessness and pathetic weakness, but also his dual dependence on Marie as both lover and mother. Was there a hint of Oedipal fixation here? In Buchner's text Marie has a little son, but here the choreography unites the husband and the son into one figure and the relationship between the three members of the triangle gains in complexity and so does Marie's moral conflict.

But invigorating as such a feminist reading of the play may be, one cannot help regretting the simplification and omissions it entailed. One

missed the earthy realism of the world Buchner portrays, his deliciously grotesque caricatures and many vivid vignettes. In Lerchenberg-Thony's scheme of things there was no place for anything coarse or sordid, obscene or vulgar, and in this rarefied atmosphere one could hardly imagine Buchner's drunken 'apprentice' singing out loud in the tavern, in scene 12: "I'm wearing someone else's shirt / My soul's a stink of drink and dirt"; or delivering a farcical, blasphemous parody of a semon and winding it up with four-letter words. Nor could one imagine Marie admiring the drum-major for being "broad as an ox" with "a beard like a lion", and hear the major retorting: "We'll start a stud for little drum-majors."

In this production the three main characters, Woytzeck (Ahmed Abdel-Aziz), Marie (Reem Hegab), and the drum-major (Mohamed Shafiq) looked beautiful, graceful, ethereal and thoroughly romantic, while the minimalist set (a bare stage with just a white screen at the back), the frugal, unobtrusive lighting effects, and Judith Wegener's simple black and white costumes, with a tiny splash of red, placed them in a neutral, formalised, ahistorical context.

A degree of simplification is perhaps inevitable in adapting any literary text, and particularly one as rich as *Woyzeck*, to the medium of dance and movement — even when the artist achieves a perfect correspondence between music and movement as Lerchenberg-Thony does here. But here, the simplification went a bit too far, and I could not help wondering if this was not, perhaps, the result of working on a tiny budget with a group which consists mostly of amateurs, with little or no previous training or experience in dance theatre. The production was the result of two one-month workshops conducted over two

successive years; and judging by the performance of the dancers in general, and that of Reem Hegab in particular, one cannot but congratulate Lerchenberg-Thony on the remarkable success of her project. She has achieved a great deal in a very short time and ought to be proud of her students and of the valuable work she has done in and for Egypt. In return, she has gained not only our respect and gratitude, but also our deep affection.

Wild Concoctions

A Tunisian *Faust* at Al-Hanager*

Assuming that you can make it across Tahrir Square without being run over (a feat that requires some acrobatic skills), the distance from Al-Hanager Centre to Al-Gomhoria Theatre can be easily covered on foot in less than half on hour. And yet, last week, going from one to the other seemed, in terms of the theatrical experience you get at each, like crossing the Grand Canyon. It was as if both venues had secretly conspired to expose the Cairene audience to two irreconcilable extremes of theatre.

Raja Ben Ammar's Tunisian *Faust*, a strange and wild mixture of Goethe's opus and Tennessee Williams' *A Streetcar Named Desire* liberally laced with some of the songs Kurt Weil composed for Brecht's plays and one song by Um Kulthum, was aggressively, almost oppressively, physical. The moral — the deplorable position of women in the Arab world — was all too obvious. It boiled down basically to good old-fashioned sex and violence punctuated by generous flashes of Ben Ammar's lovely legs. Superimposing the unfortunate Blanche Du Bois upon the equally hapless Gretchen, with the shadow of Stella, Blanche's sister, occasionally glimpsed lurking in the background, Ben Ammar was alternately seduced (by Mephistopheles), beaten (by Faust), and raped (by both) with almost monotonous regularity. As passions ran wild and the four actors flung themselves about the stage and writhed on the floor, suddenly crackling flames leapt up as a real

* 2.4.1998. In Arabic.

fire was ignited on stage. It was impressive, if painfully obvious; it also led to a half-hour delay on the opening night as the Al-Hanager staff rushed around frantically in search of a gas regulator valve to prevent the theatre from providing what could have been the most spectacular fireworks display since the opening of the new Opera House, or, indeed, since the old one, which once stood in Opera Square, downtown, went up in flames in 1970, in full view of the fire department.

I could not understand why anyone needed a fire with Ben Ammar on stage! She gives off enough sparks and waves of heat as it is. And, indeed, as it turned out, not only the fire, but everything as well (including the many sound and visual effects and the complicated set which sported the hulk of a Volkswagen in one corner — Faust was German after all) proved superfluous. One had eyes only for Ben Ammar and she gave a riveting performance, at once fiercely passionate and technically brilliant. With a performance like this, who cares if the text and conception she worked out with Almunsif Alsayem (who played the brutal, wife-battering, wife-raping oriental Faust) were sometimes unbearably clumsy or down-right vulgar?

The Road to Paradise

Roberto Ciulli's *Pinnochio-Faust* at Al-Salam theatre*

In his book, *Roberto Ciulli and the Theater an der Ruhr* (recently published in Arabic by the Higher Institute of Theatre Arts, Damascus, and revised by Nabil El-Haffar), Iraqi director Aouni Karrumi, whose long wanderings have finally led him to Germany and to the home of the Theater an der Ruhr in Mulheim, mentions that Ciulli once said: "If we were living in paradise we would not need theatre; but since our life is not paradise in any sense or form, we make theatre to create paradise, to dream of it and experience it through theatre. The art of theatre becomes the reality that has to keep changing and transforming itself in order to become paradise."

Except on rare occasions, my response to statements of this kind which seem to confuse art and religion and make of the artist something of a saviour, a spiritual leader, or a holy saint, is a mixture of irritation and deep suspicion. Unfortunately, they have become quite fashionable and the trend was probably started, quite innocently, by the truly great Austrian director Max Reinhardt who sought the model for theatre in the Catholic Church. Defending his model he argued: "The Catholic Church which aims at the most spiritual, the most supernatural, does so by means which appeal directly to our senses ... it surrounds us with the mystical dimness of its cathedrals; it charms our eye ... it fills our ear ... it stupefies us by the odour of its incense. And in such an

* 29.10.1998. In German.

atmosphere of sensuousness, the highest and the most holy reveals itself to us. We reveal ourselves and we find the way to our innermost being, the way to concentration, to exaltation, to spiritualisation."

I have no quarrel with the bit about 'sensuousness': theatre is perhaps one of the most intensely sensuous experiences you can come across (and for more reasons than Reinhardt cares to mention); but if one is looking for a genuine religious experience or wants to be spiritually uplifted, that is led up out of the real, physical world, I do not think theatre is the place they should go. What about Ciulli and his talk of making theatre to create paradise? It faintly echoes Reinhardt, but the echo is deceptive. If you ask Ciulli the question Reinhardt put to himself: "How to make a play live in our time?" you will find that he has no ready models or formulas, and you will hear no mention of spiritualisation. He will lead you by the hand to a quiet corner of his busy office, offer you vodka, coffee, schnapps and cigars, and remain silent for some moments. Puffing away at his cigar (he is never seen without one, and some suspect they sprout naturally out of his hand), he looks ageless and disturbingly enigmatic — at once a venerable sage and an impish satyr. When he is ready, he will tell you in a gentle, confidential tone that theatre is all about relating — relating to the self, to the other, to one's society and culture, as well as to other societies and cultures, to history, the present and the future. A play lives to the extent that it manages to relate to any or as many of these; but relating is never easy or final. It is a continuous task that involves a partial loss in crossing over to the other and bridging the gaps. The gaps may be political, existential, psychological, or religious; but in all cases, the task requires great courage, tolerance and honesty; and also faith and a willingness to surrender and integrate.

This explains a lot of things: the multicultural, religious and ethnic composition of the Theater an der Rhur company, the obvious political character of its productions, its active championing of the rights of minorities and the oppressed, and its guiding policy of cultural interaction. It also clarifies what Ciulli means when he uses the word 'paradise'. The paradise he and his company long and hope to create in and through the theatre is not a transcendental concept, but a profoundly political one.

In pursuing his political paradise, Ciulli relinquished the security of home and country, and turned his back on philosophy. With a Doctorate in philosophy in his pocket, he left the safe cloisters of academia (in 1960) to pitch a tent outside Milano, his home city, and launch a roving, mobile theatre which he significantly christened Il Globo. For two years he toured the Italian countryside with his company, shunning the big cities with their bourgeois audiences, and relating to the grass roots. The next step was moving to another country and relating to a different culture. In Germany, he was always on the move, working in various theatres and many cities, before he finally established his own permanent ensemble in 1980 and found a home for it in tiny Mulheim. But the company stays at home only part of the year, to perform and host guest companies; the rest of the year, it spends on the road, travelling, performing, and relating to other artists and cultures.

For 18 years, this brave contingent of 12 actors, led by Ciulli, with the company's dramaturge, Helmut Schafer, and its geonographer, Gralf- Edzard Habben, worked hard to establish theatre as, and at, the leading edge of political consciousness and make it function as an agent

for the continuous assimilation, accommodation and integration of different cultures. This spirit has informed the production process at every stage and in every aspect. The method of work adopted by the company is most unorthodox: they do not start with a text, but with the issue or subject they most relate to at the time, both personally and politically. Violence, racial conflict and discrimination, economic exploitation, unemployment and education are examples. The subject decides which text is chosen; but the text is not treated as a complete, final, or closed statement, but, rather, as an open space where everyone can exercise their creativity. The play may be Brecht's *Drums in the Night*, Gorki's *The Lower Depths*, Goldoni's *The Servant of Two Masters*, or what you will; it does not make a difference. The same rule applies to them all: no text is sacred. And no classic goes into the Theater an der Ruhr and comes out whole, if it comes out at all. It is used as a starting point, a launching pad, and material for improvisation in the process of building the performance script. In this process, the actors are as actively involved and creative as the director, the scenographer and the dramaturge. They bring their own memories, experiences, loyalties and anxieties into the text until it explodes under the pressure.

The performance script that this collaborative process of creative exploration and intense interaction with present day reality, on the one hand, and the chosen text, on the other, yields is an intricate, fascinating mosaic in which fragments of the text crisscross with personal and collective memories, images of the present, faint traces and echoes of other texts, nightmarish fantasies, and elements from popular culture, folklore and religion. One may not approve of this way of making use of the classics, or any dramatic text (and many do not,

calling it hacking, mauling and mangling the text); but it is integral to the work and philosophy of the Theater an der Ruhr, and it usually produces provocative and thrilling results.

The company's latest production, *Pinocchio Faust*, which visited Cairo last week and gave two performances at Al-Salam theatre, is a case in point. Here, Carlo Collodi's popular book, *Pinocchio* (1882), which has become a classic, is superimposed upon the old popular legend that built up around the German wandering conjuror, Faust, in the 16th Century, the many street puppet shows it inspired in Italy afterwards (of which Goethe actually saw one during a trip to Italy), and Goethe's own *Faust*. The dialogue between the sources produces stunning correspondences and shattering insights and ironies. As the characters and incidents culled from the various sources merge, paradoxes pile up: Geppetto, who sits in the first scene by his fireplace carving the wooden doll that would become Pinocchio, becomes Mephisto, inhabiting his hell, Pinocchio's father in other scenes, and the 'Father' on some occasions. The connection between Pinocchio and Faust is established through 'Geppetto-Mephisto' in the puppet show scene in which Pinocchio sits on stage, in the dark, after trading his school books for a theatre ticket, watching the prologue to Goethe's *Faust I* ('The Prologue in Heaven' in which Mephisto obtains permission from the Lord to ruin the soul of Faust) performed by puppets manipulated from high up by 'Geppetto-Mephisto-the Father'. When the doll playing the Lord jumps down to where Pinocchio sits, and Pinocchio is threatened to be thrown into the fire-place as a punishment for his truancy and misbehaviour, the identification

between him and Faust is complete. The story of Pinocchio's creation, childhood, and education becomes the story of Faust, and, perhaps, of all of us.

In the second part we see what all this education and drilling we have seen in the first part has done to 'Pinocchio-Faust'. The stage is stripped completely bare, except for a fire-place at one side and a computer at the back. Pinocchio (played by a different actor) declaims from a wheelchair Faust's soliloquy which opens Goethe's play. The march of progress and enlightenment has yielded nothing but disillusionment and despair. 'Geppetto-Mephisto' comes to his aid, and, disguised as a gaudy whore, seals the contract with a vampirish kiss. 'Pinocchio-Faust' has liberated himself from his education, his heritage and cultural past, and the liberation takes the form of literally murdering his childhood and former self in the figure of the pupil (played by the actress who played Pinocchio in the first part) who comes for a lesson.

Pinocchio-Faust is the first part of a trilogy (the third part is still in the making) which traces the progress of Faust from childhood, through manhood, to old age and death, and with it the march of European civilization. It is also part of a larger and more ambitious project, dreamt up by Ciulli. In every culture there is a Faust, he thought; he may bear another name and start from different premises, but he is bound to have raised the same questions that tortured Goethe's Faust and to have had the same passions and longings. Why not discover all the unknown Fausts, bring them together, compare them, and establish a dialogue between cultures and religions? And what better route can one follow on such an expedition than The Silk Road?

— that ancient trade route that once linked China with the West and carried goods and ideas between the civilizations it passed through. And so, The Silk Road theatrical project was born. The Theater an der Ruhr started with its own version of Faust which, with the help of the Goethe Institute, will visit every country that was once on the Silk Road. It has already visited Turkey, and its visit to Egypt is part of the project. In turn, every country involved in the project will prepare its own Faust (partially funded from the project's budget) which will be hosted by the Theater an der Ruhr. In Egypt, Intisar Abdel Fattah (who won the award for best production in ths last CIFET) has already prepared his contribution, *Drums for Faust*, which the whole Theater an der Ruhr company watched last Monday.

Giulli's dream is slowly coming true. As he travels eastward, down the Silk Road, he will also be travelling into the past, down history, and voyaging through alien cultures, like an explorer, in search of his paradise.

A Question of Merit

Egyptian *Drums for Faust* at Al-Ghad theatre*

Often, if not invariably, the announcement of the CIFET awards stirs up controversy, with reactions ranging from passionate approbation to mild or violent disapproval. Such critical skirmishes have become a feature of the CIFET closing ceremony every year, and are even welcomed and anticipated as a spicy addition to the excitement of the occasion.

This year, however, the Egyptian critics' reaction to one particular award was unprecedentedly unanimous and took the form of stunned bafflement. The nomination of Sami Al-Adl for the best actor award for his performance as Mephisto in Intisar Abdel Fattah's *Drums for Faust* (based on Goethe's play) and his winning it jointly with the Spanish Dritan Brahimllari who played Woyzeck, completely threw them off balance and landed them with the dilemma of trying to reconcile their firm and longstanding evaluation of this actor with the jury's. It is not only that Al-Adl is generally ranked as a modest actor of the traditional classical school, that he rarely appears on stage, prefering untaxing parts in T.V. soap operas, or especially tailored star roles in films produced by his own film company, or that he has never shown the least bit of interest in or curiosity about avant-garde theatre or the experimental festival, and would probably gape at you in bewildered incomprehension at the mention of the word; more than anything else, it is the fact that of late Al-Adl has emerged as a big film producer,

* 16.9.1999. In Arabic.

churning out a series of commercial blockbusters (all starring comedian Mohamed Heneidi, whom he signed up for a 5-year monopoly contract), the last of which is *Hammam in Amesterdam.*

Though a graduate of the Theatre Institute, Al-Adl's fairy-tale success as film producer has almost put paid to whatever claim to reputation as an actor he might have had. One does not simply think of him as an actor anymore, or if one does, it is as a film actor foisted on the screen through the power of his own money.

I remember how utterly surprised I felt when just before going in to watch an open rehearsal of the *Drums* at the Goethe Institute, a few days before the festival, director Intisar Abdel Fattah gingerly told me that Al-Adl was playing Mephisto. He prefaced the news with the warning: "You will never guess whom I have chosen for Mephisto." He paused, then stammered out the name, hastily adding: "but, please, suspend all judgement till you have seen him. I think he is made for the part." Though 'naked' – without sets, props, lighting, or costumes, and performed in the cramped space of the Goethe auditorium, with the singers, musicians, and three principal actors (Al-Adl, Ahmad abdel Warith, and Safaa Al-Toukhi) sitting in rows, facing the audience across a small platform where Samia Allouba, with two willowy dancers, executed the choreographed sections, this tryout performance more than vindicated Intisar's judgement and was by far the best-researched and artistically most original and sophisticated of all the Egyptian productions nominated to represent Egypt in the festival's international competition.

Intisar had worked on this production for a whole year, painstakingly revising and, in some respects, radically altering an

unsuccessful first version of it presented last year. He replaced the original cast with solid actors, physically and vocally better suited to the parts, and whose strong, well-trained voices could provide emotional and tonal variety as well as interlace with the other elements of the complex musical conception of the work. And this musical conception itself became richer and more stirring by the introduction of melodies, rhythms, and modes of intonation drawn from the rich vocal tradition of Quranic recitation and religious chanting.

Indeed, the new version of *Drums for Faust*, takes off with an intricately orchestrated choral recital of the 99 holy names of God by euphoric chanters hoisted on high pulpits around the rectangular Al-Ghad hall (where the production eventually opened). Other singers and musicians sat behind the audience, along one wall draped with Persian carpets, while on the other side, similarly draped, Intisar busied himself with a piano and various traditional and original sound-producing instruments, including an old manual grinder. The two narrow sides of the hall were occupied by Mephisto, at his knife-sharpening wheel, and Faust, inside a man-size bird's cage, with his youthful doppelganger sitting on top. In the space between, Al-Toukhi, as the 'spirit of the earth', knelt on a small prayer-rug, facing the three female dancers who represented the ideals of wisdom, beauty and lust she conjured up for Faust.

The compelling choral opening, together with the austere set and colour palette, and the severly geometrical movement patterns and disposition of the actors round the hall effected the metaphoric transformation of the physical space into a spiritual one. In this vibrant imaginary space, armed with a new subtle and sophisticated script, inspired by, and redolent of the writings of Muslim *sufis* and oriental

mystics, and composed in collaboration with poet Ahmed Sweilam, actors Abdel Warith and Al-Adl played out the eternal, unresolved Faust-Mephisto conflict, fencing and parrying with comsummate vocal skill, and transposing it, with the help of Al-Toukhi's brooding stillness and powerful presence and Allouba's fresh and eloquent choreography, to a vividly outlined and evocatively textured Islamic cultural context. Nevertheless, the conflict remains unresolved (as it should), and the work bravely eschews the temptation to provide comforting solutions and facile reconciliations. Those who expect a rousing religious finale of the calibre of the spiritually uplifting and almost hypnotic choral prelude will be sorely disappointed. The performance ends in silence and complete stillness, with Faust and Mephisto at opposite ends, gazing at each other with a mixture of mutual enmity and sympathetic identification. This end may disturb the pious and religious conservatives; but in refusing to make concessions and compromises, it gives the work enduring credibility and preserves its integrity.

In this context, any actor with a decent enough talent, an impressive physique, and a deep voice that he can skilfully manipulate is bound to thrive; and I must admit that Al-Adl looked and sounded every inch a Mephisto, and his coolness, consistently urbane demeanour, unaffected wit and polished smile made his eerily reverberating whispers all the more menacing. No wonder he impressed the jury who were blissfully ignorant of his previous career and, therefore, more objective in their evaluation of his performance than any Egyptian critic can be.

Glory to the Body

The Tanztheater Bremen at Al-Gomhoria theatre*

On my way to see the Tanztheater Bremen double bill last week, I was sure it would be splendidly choreographed and superbly staged. But rather than feel excited, I had an irresistible urge to yawn. I felt I knew already what it would be like and wondered why I was going. Curiosity perhaps? Or a faint hope that may be this time it would be different? After so many years of watching dance theatre one gets the feeling that one has seen it all, that choreographers have completely exhausted all the possible kinetic, aesthetic and expressive potential of the human body and that all they can do now, if they are clever, is try to think up new ways of combining the available and by now tediously familiar store of movement scores and phrases and play them off against varied scenic backgrounds, lighting effects and soundtracks in the hope of forging a startling image, evoking a metaphor, or creating a mood. No wonder most dance shows come dazzlingly packaged in sheets of glowing verbiage and sealed with the blessings of eminent critics or famous reviewers. At best, this is intended to precondition the viewers and persuade them to channel whatever impressions they glean in a particular interpretative (or, indeed, deconstructivist) direction. At worst, it is used to mask mediocrity and pass it off as profound.

In this respect, the printed programme of the Bremen dance theatre's double bill in Cairo was a rare exception. It had none of the usual obfuscating, highfalutin language or dull, simplistic explanatory

* 3.10.2002.

notes one invariably encounters in such literature. Apart from describing the company as "one of the two pillars of Dance Theatre in Germany" and recording that a certain dance critic by the name of Jochen Schmidt dubbed it the "Mecca of Dance Theatre", it contained nothing but useful factual information about the history of the company, the names of the famous dancers who passed through it, a short biography of its present artistic director, Swiss choreographer and dancer Urs Dietrich, and the names of the dancers and artistic crew for each of the two scheduled pieces.

The first, *Flut* (or The Tide), a solo dance choreographed by Susanne Linke (former co-artistic director of the company from 1994 to 1996) and performed by Dietrich, was meditative in a lyrical vein and very short, lasting less than 15 minutes. Except for a big roll of blue cloth, the stage was empty and softly lit throughout. The sea, with its cyclic rise and fall, is the source of inspiration here, as the title indicates, and the repetitive sequence at the beginning, in which the lone man, Dietrich, slowly unfolds the cloth, creating his own sea, little by little, in complete silence, draws on the movement vocabulary of swimming, fishing and rowing.

When music invades the scene in the form of parts of Gabriel Faure's *Elegy* for cello and orchestra, and is frequently interrupted by pauses in which we overhear the muffled voice of an invisible conductor in the wings, giving directions to his players and making them repeat the same musical passages, as in a rehearsal, the movement changes in response. Instead of the peaceful, almost hypnotic rhythmical repetitions of the initial silent sequence, it now proceeds in flow-stop-pause cycles, following the rhythms of the man's frustrating

relationship with the music and expressing his bewilderment and consternation at the erratic behaviour of the maestro in the wings. Just as the music suddenly stops at the maestro's will, the man would often interrupt a figurative movement (like unfurling the cloth and waving it to make it billow then jumping and rolling into it), walk to one of the brilliantly lighted openings leading into the wings and gaze expectantly into it.

Though the conductor in the wings, rehearsing his music, is never aware of the dancer on stage trying to create his sea-dance, we are made to feel the conflict between them and to sympathise with the latter who looks pathetically lonely and vulnerable. As the dramatic tension builds up to the climax and finale — the dancer's defeat as a man against the unseen tune-setter, his failure as an artist to create his own make-believe sea and dance, and his final exit (or death) – the initial metaphor, an old one, of "the tides of life", or of the sea as representing both life and death, merges with another, equally old – that of "the world as a stage and we're all players on it."

The climax is marked by the sudden and startling disappearance of the blue cloth into the wings, right in front of the dancer's incredulous eyes, as if deftly snatched by an invisible hand. In the silence, he stands completely still for a minute, as if dazed, helplessly gazing at the place where it disappeared, then walks off, leaving us with the silent, empty stage for a while before the lights begin to fade gradually to blackout. Gazing at the empty stage, wondering if the dancer will reappear and slowly realizing, no, this is the end, the irony of using Faure's Elegy suddenly hit me; all along, it was being rehearsed by the invisible orchestra in preparation for the artist's death and the poor man was

trying to live by it and dance to it. More than an aching meditation on life and death, *Flut* is also about the tragic fate of the artist killed by the pursuit of his/her art, about creativity in relation to the authority of artistic tradition, and about human freedom when it clashes with authoritarian religious or political institutions. True it has not come up with anything novel movement-wise, that the ideas it projects are too vague and general and have been long in circulation in dance circles, and the use of a sheet of cloth to simulate water is positively hackneyed, nevertheless, it had intensity, concentration and emotional power and the choreography was clear, sharp, carefully thought out and exquisitely performed with ethereal grace by Urs Dietrich.

The second piece, *Every Body*, choreographed by Dietrich this time and performed by nine superb dancers, was more complex, ambitious and innovative. For me, it seemed to define dance theatre as I understand and like it – as an exploration and celebration of the physicality of life in its myriad shapes, moods and rhythms. No figurative use of the body here, no striving after metaphors; the body is not used as a vehicle for mystical musings, philosophical reflection, existential protest, ritualistic reenacting of past experiences or social and/or political satire. It is there to be carefully discovered and lovingly displayed in all its parts and states of being. Hence the title *Every Body*, and not Everybody.

Christoph Becker's austere stage and lighting design (black on all sides and dimly lit except for a bright spotlight in one or two scenes) and Andreas Moje's equally ascetic but weirdly funny costumes (also uniformly black, except for two scenes), are central to the choreographic plan and visual impact of this intensely absorbing piece.

Using black against black was a calculated risk and it paid. In their black costumes, the covered parts of the dancers' bodies seemed to melt into the dark background and surrounding shadows while the light picked up the bare parts — legs, feet, arms, hands, necks, shoulders or faces — or was reflected back from the glossy surface of some material, like leather, forming intense pools of light.

This allowed Dietrich to compose some startling variations on the shape of the human body: a woman at the far back seemed like a trunkless face and two arms, floating in the dark; another kept moving back until she was nothing but two tiny dots of light reflected from her shoulders; a man in black with bare legs became a three-legged dancing creature when another dancer, all in black except for one leg, stood behind him, shoving the bare leg between his thighs, then flinging it sideways from his hips. Other grotesque compositions included a woman with a head, one leg and one arm; a man with a head, two legs and no torso or arms; a man with three arms, two of them joined at the elbow; two lovers who conducted their flirtation and fighting solely with their feet and legs; three geisha-style dancing girls who seemed to have wheels instead of legs under their quilted bell-shaped dresses the way they glided round and round; shapeless, slimy-looking bodies, creeping and slithering on the floor like insects, and others crawling on hands and feet and scurrying away in fear; an abnormally tall and thin man, wearing high platform shoes and walking on tiptoe with air-inflated cushions round his neck and another, equally tall but black, wearing a silver, shoulderless evening dress which looked as if it was empty, or inhabited by a shadow and moving by itself, as the man receded in the background.

These grotesque images of the human body are set off against a range of relatively normal ones: a woman in a swimsuit admiring herself and caressing her body; another fighting desperately to control her rebellious limbs and keep them in the socially acknowledged proper place; a third in a position of prayer; a group of men and women moving rigidly in a diagonal line, their heads tilted sideways, and so forth. The interplay of white and black, light and darkness is paralleled in the soundtrack which accompanies the performance by the alternation of sweet instrumental music with eerie atmospheric sound effects and both reflect the two sets of choreographic dynamics in the piece: the normal on the one hand and the odd or grotesque on the other.

Without the magnificent Bremen dancers, however, *Every Body* might not have come across so faultlessly or made the same impact. They created a vibrant, dynamic ensemble which thrilled 'every body' in the audience, including those who confessed that they could not make head or tail of it.

"Who This War Is Against?"

Brecht's *Mann ist Mann* at the AUC*

In Brecht's pungent political farce, *A Man Is A Man*, the Chaplinesque hero, Galy Gay, a simple Irish docker in India who at the beginning of the play has no bigger ambition than to buy a small fish for dinner, unexpectedly gets embroiled with the invading British army and ends up as Jeraiah Jip, an army hero and "human fighting-machine." Ironically, the metamorphoses is set in motion by a good-natured act when Galy Gay, "a man who can't say no", agrees (though not without some kind of reward in the form of so many bottles of beer and boxes of cigars) to cover up for the absence of one of the crew of a machine-gun detachment and answer to his name during the evening's roll call to save his comrades from punishment. He naively accepts the vague explanation the soldiers offer for their missing member who, in fact, was left drunk, slumped in a palanquin, outside a native temple they had burgled earlier; his hair had got stuck in the tar judiciously smeared on the door lentil by the Pagoda bonze, Wang, leaving him with a tell-tale bald patch which was sure to damn them all. By the time the three men return with a pair of scissors to shave off the rest of his hair and elude the suspicions of their commander, Sergeant Fairchild (or "Bloody Five, the human Typhoon", as he is nicknamed), he has been taken into the temple by Wang, doused with liquor, stuffed with steak and transformed into a mock-god for the benefit of the gullible worshippers whom Wang regularly fleeces.

* 7.11.2002. In English.

The process of metamorphosing the friendly, amenable, sober civilian Galy Gay, who can easily satisfy his appetites through his imagination, as he says when speaking of the elusive fish he never gets to buy, into a social bully and a voracious, drunken, chain-smoking, lecherous military butcher who doesn't bat an eye at killing hundreds of civilians, reaches its climax in scene 9. Here, giving up the real Jeraiah Jip for lost, the trio of gunners, led by Uriah Shelley, decide (as widow Begbick announces in the interlude before the scene) to do a "reconstruction job" on Galy Gay and "remodel" him "like a car" into Private Jeraiah Jip.

The tools they use are economic and instinctual: the lure of a big fortune (and the leap up the social ladder that goes with it) and fear of death. They trick their prey into a business deal which involves posing as the unnamed owner of "the supernumerary and unregistered Army elephant Billy Humph" and selling it. Billy Humph, however, the champion of Bengal, according to Uriah, is no elephant at all, but an obvious mockup: two men under a military map with a gasmask for a trunk and a muffler for ears. Dazzled by the prospect of lots of easy money, Galy Gay decides to suppress his doubts and turn a blind eye to the elephant's suspicious appearance. "An elephant is an elephant, especially if someone's buying him," he echoes Uriah to reassure himself; and "buying him" is what Widow Begbick, the owner of the beer-wagon who assists in the intrigue, offers to do. But, as soon as the deal is clinched, Galy Gay is dragged before a mock-court marshal to face the absurd double charge of theft (stealing and selling an army elephant) and fraudulence (selling a fake elephant to an unsuspecting customer); finally he is terrorized by a mock-firing squad into doubting

then renouncing his personal identity "for all eternity" and adopting that of Jeriah Jip to keep alive.

Typically, in view of Brecht's recurrent ironical use of popular dramatic/theatrical forms (like farce, the music hall, the circus, and the silent movies of Charlie Chaplin) as vehicles for his political and social views, and his fascination with the grotesque cabaret sketches made popular by Bavarian dialect comedian Karl Valentin, whom he met in 1919, a year before he started on *Galgei*, as *Mann ist Mann* was originally called, the scene is farcically staged as a collection of "numbers", like a circus show, with each ceremoniously announced by Uriah Shelley, the author and stage director of the plot, in the manner of a circus ringmaster. In the third "Number" of this crucial, focal scene — almost the equivalent in dramatic value and function to an Aristotelian peripeteia — the counterfeit judges withdraw to consider their verdict and there is a momentary lull in the boisterous proceedings. All is quiet except for the faint murmurs of hushed voices in the background. As Galy Gay tensely strains his ears in suspense to catch what they are saying, one of the soldiers standing on guard casually throws a question at his companion in a nonchalant tone, as if to pass the time: "Has anybody found out who this war's against?" he asks; the other replies, sardonically revealing the economic motives behind most wars: "If they need cotton, it's Tibet; if they need wool, it's Pamir."

In the recent AUC production, the premiere of the play in Egypt, director Frank Bradley inserted half a sentence — the only liberty he took with the text — making the soldier add: "and if they need OIL, it is ...", before he is promptly shushed by the rest of the cast. Nevertheless, those few words had a bombshell effect, blowing up the

barrier between stage time and auditorium time and between past and present. Suddenly, the performance took on the character of an awful prediction, as if it were a figurative chronicle of what the future holds. Gory images of American troops storming into Iraq to control its oil sources, as the US seems hell-bent on doing, destroying homes, schools and possibly air-raid shelters, killing thousands of civilians and losing thousands of poor, deluded American and Iraqi soldiers in the prime of youth, were superimposed upon the ridiculous escapades of the shabby representatives of the British colonial army facing us on stage. With one ingenious stroke, Bradley set in motion a chain of associations and the play, set in India in the year 1925, was imaginatively hauled into the Middle East and the year 2002 and invested with a new sense of urgency. It became an ominous warning — not just against what Brecht identified as "the bad collective", or against imperialism and militarism in general and the dehumanizing effect of the war machine on individuals, but also, and primarily, against a specific, concrete, immediate threat about to become a horrible reality.

One couldn't help but read in the transformation of Galy Gay into a blind fighting-machine the fate of thousands of Iraqi and American young men who are going to be persuaded or forcibly conscripted, as the case may be, to take part in the imminent carnage and become expendable, exchangeable cogs in a gigantic, merciless wheel that crushes everything and all civilians in its blind, headlong march. One was also tempted to detect in Galy Gay's brutal indifference to human life once he "tasted blood", and his tyrannical, exploitative treatment of his comrades, whose rations he regularly commandeers, exposing them

to the danger of starvation, the makings of a future, ruthless military dictator, not unlike Saddam Hussein.

Here, as in his previous *Antigone*, Bradley chose a world classic that could engage contemporary reality in earnest dialogue and address pressing issues in the present, and projected through it, in concrete theatrical terms, his political reflections, existential questions and moral concerns. Whether he meant it or not, his stage version of *A Man Is A Man* — evocatively designed by Scott Weldin (set) Jeanne Arnold (costumes) and Stancil Campbell (lighting), and accurately and robustly rendered by a competent, lively and well-disciplined cast, led by Karim Bishay (as Galy Gay), Diana Brauch, Luke Lehner, Ramsi Lehner and Michael Dwan (as the four machine-gun crew), Yara Atef as Widow Begbick, Mariam Ali as Wang and Ratko Ivekovic (as Bloody Five), with Ashraf Fouad on the piano to accompany the songs and provide sound effects — came across as a candid political protest against the foreign policies of the current US administration, including its tacit condoning of Israel's bombing of Palestinian homes, destruction of refugee camps and wholesale killing of civilians. It is to his credit, however, that, despite all the grotesquerie, aggressive slapstick, pungent satire and forceful parabolic drive of the text, the energy of the political protest was often tempered with profound sympathy for the wretched specimens of humanity we meet in the play and sensitively shadowed with a pervasive, poignant awareness of what another German dramatist, Ernst Toller, once expressed as "the ineluctable pain that no political panacea can cure" and called it "the tragic element of life."

Little Man, Big Man

Another *Woyzeck* and the Egyptian premiere of Max Friesh's *Count Oderland* at Al-Salam theatre*

Buchner's *Woyzeck* (written 1836 and first produced in 1913) is a popular play with young actors and directors in Egypt and is sporadically revived, in one form or another, by theatre students in their graduation projects as well as by amateur and regional theatre troupes. The most sophisticated reworking of this text, however, was undertaken by Austrian dancer and choreographer Eva-Maria Lerchenberg-Thony in 1997, when she used it as material for a one-month dance- theatre workshop at Al-Hanager. By the end of the workshop, the material had been shaped into a highly polished, graceful performance, alternately lyrical and erotic, ethereal and passionate, and exclusively focusing on the eternal triangle at the heart of the play. Marie, rather than Woyzeck, became the gravitational centre of the play. It felt as if the story was projected exclusively through her eyes and her moral dilemma as a woman torn between her overpowering sexual passion for one man and her loyalty and duty to another became the pivotal point.

Exciting as this feminist reading was, it was ultimately reductive. It oversimplified Woyzeck's suffering to one aspect – sexual jealousy – and robbed him of his deep religious feelings, haunting sense of sin and harrowing descent into madness. The current Youth theatre production

* 20.2.2003. In Arabic.

of the play under the new title *Recruit No. 311*, hosted at Yusef Idris hall in Al-Salam theatre, reinstates Woyzek as the focal figure and recovers for him (thanks to Nidal El-Shaf'i's sensitive handling of the part) something of his original complexity and pathos. It is, however, yet another adaptation and attempts to condense the text by cutting out, adumbrating or amalgamating some scenes. The number of the dramatis personae is reduced to six, the captain and the drum-major are compounded into one figure, all the marginal characters are removed and a clown in motley is provided to do what is left of their parts. Though it uses a single set (by Ahmed Sherbi) – a dimly-lit, cramped, grimy room, with filthy, urine-stained, grey walls, hung round with old rusty buckets, broken chains and wheels and like objects, with a low platform and a single door at the back, and rubbish strewn everywhere on the floor – this new version (adapted by Hatem Hafiz) observes Buchner's original structure of abrupt, loosely related, autonomous scenes, with no firm chronological order or causal connections. Like the play, the performance here achieved its impact through accumulation rather than causal development.

Hafez kept most of the basic scenes and director Islam Imam cleverly orchestrated the movement of his actors to indicate the change of location without changing the set. The carnival to which Woyzek and Marie go, the tavern where he sees her dancing with the drum-major, the fields where he wanders and talks to his friend Andres, the captain's room where he shaves him, the doctor's clinic and the humble room he shares with Marie are all contained in this one dreary set, suggesting that no matter where the downtrodden, spiritually crushed Woyzeck goes, his world remains a squalid, cheerless prison. The acting which ranged from melodramatic blustering and swaggering (in the case of

Ihab Bakir as the captain/drum-major), to farcical caricature (in Ahmed Abdel Hadi's doctor), to suppressed, intense emotion and mounting nervous tension (in Nidal El-Shaf'i's Woyzeck and Jessica's Marie), was geared to play down the sexual theme and highlight, by way of social and political protest, the tragic plight of the poor and helpless and the horrible physical and spiritual degradation they suffer at the hands of the rich and powerful.

In this compressed version of the play, the horror seemed to mount at a breathless pace, without relief or respite. In short, quick scenes, we watched Woyzeck psychologically tormented, morally bullied and viciously knocked about by the Captain; physically abused and humiliated by the Doctor and treated like a laboratory guineapig; sexually and morally betrayed by his woman under the pressure of need; and, finally, stripped of the last vestiges of male pride by the captain/drum-major who sneers at him, taunts him about Marie and saucily brags about seducing her. When finally, instead of taking revenge on his oppressors and tormentors, he turns on the only person weaker than himself, the equally harassed and victimized Marie, and vents his rage and frustration on her, the irony is too bitter to tolerate. The message Islam Imam and his crew wanted to put across reached the audience loud and clear. But in the process, something of the text's animal vitality, robust ribaldry, iconoclastic audacity and elusive, wistful charm was lost.

It was a positive relief to step into the big hall of Al-Salam theatre, after a short interval and a nice cup of tea, and watch Max Frisch's Count Oderland – in the play that carries his name – wave his axe in the face of all the rich and powerful and wreak havoc on their world. After

Woyzeck, it seemed a welcome, just retribution. Though available in a smooth, accurate and highly actable Arabic translation (by Anis Mansour) since the 1960s, the present El-Tali'a production (also hosted by Al-Salam) marks the Egyptian premiere of this 1951 play. Why did it take so long to reach the boards? Director Maher Selim confessed to me that he thought it was "a trap" when the head of the state-theatre sector – Hani Metaweh – proposed it to him. Other directors must have thought the same and shied away from it. It is a difficult, tricky play, riddled with question marks, and the dividing line between reality, dream or fantasy in it is never easy to discern or ascertain.

Why does the hero, a distinguished, respectable public prosecutor and family man become totally, personally obsessed with a senseless murder case in which a perfectly sane and ordinary man kills an innocent stranger with an axe for no reason whatsoever? Was Frisch trying to suggest through it a kind of mysterious existential need or urge similar to the one that drives the hero of Albert Camus' *The Stranger* (1942) to a similarly senseless act? But, more to the point, does the prosecutor really disappear, or simply dreams he has done so? What about his wife and friends who affirm his disappearance? Could they be doing that as part of *his* dream? Did the murder case he reviewed as prosecutor turn him off balance, or, perhaps, fuel a secret, rebellious, destructive urge buried deep in his unconscious? Was he finally incensed by his meekness in the face of his wife's infidelity and the bourgeois *menage a trois* she had forced upon him for so long and decided to escape? Did he suddenly discover how arid, lacklustre and monotonous his life as prosecutor was and is now seeking (whether in

reality or his imagination remains a dubious point) a more romantic, adventurous one?

But before you have time to sort out these problems, the prosecutor surfaces in the countryside and takes on the identity of the legendary Count Oderland, believing he is his incarnation. Like him, he uses an axe to rob and murder people and generally mess up the established social order, turning it topsy-turvy. Then he startles you by suddenly turning into a visionary, dreaming of some utopia where the shackles of convention can be finally crushed and all can be absolutely, even 'anarchically' free. With seven thousand followers, similarly inclined (who spring from God knows where), he heads for the underground network of the city's sewers to look for his utopia and there barricades himself. His rebellion grows into a full-fledged revolution and he is asked by the old regime to take matters in his hand and form a new government to put his programme into effect. Until his residence is ready, he is temporarily installed into the best house in the city – which happens to be that of the vanished prosecutor. At this point, especially when part of the first scene is repeated, and Count Oderland reverts to being the prosecutor and announces he must have been dreaming, one is momentarily assured that what had gone before was only a dream. But Frisch does not let us out of the maze that easily. Within a minute, the city officials assure us it is no dream and Oderland realizes he has been trapped into his dream of seeking unfettered existence and that, ironically, he is the one to head the oppressive power structure this time and forge new manacles. In desperation he commits suicide and, however tragic this seems, at least, his death is real.

Trying to follow this convoluted play with its many mind-boggling turns and twists is a dizzying experience which taxes the patience of the ordinary spectator – and Maher Selim knew it. He insisted on realistic sets, costumes and lighting (by Amr Abdallah) and a naturalistic mode of acting for most of the characters in an effort to dispel something of its baffling strangeness and bring it nearer the audience. By contrast, the city officials were presented as satirical caricatures of all the symbols of power and authority, perhaps to encourage the audience to find some accessible political message in the play. Izz El-Din Taha's atmospheric music and vivid sound effects, combined with the efforts of the cast, competently led by Salah Rashwan, Amal El-Zohairy and Walaa Farid, managed to create a strong illusion of reality. On the other hand, the eloquent computer graphics (also by Amr Abdallah) projected at the beginning of the play and showing, in turn, the face of every actor fading into an image of a human brain, were perhaps intended to suggest to the audience that reality, dream and fantasy are all constructions of the mind and, therefore, they shouldn't bother to distinguish them one from the other and simply enjoy the show. But throughout and up until the end, the intriguing ambiguity of the text persisted and the continuous clash between the highly realistic settings and acting and the fantastic proceedings triggered a disorienting sense of unreality, completely in line with the text's mood, and a tickling sense of absurdity which was a constant source of amusement.

The German Das Folkswang Tanzstudio

at Al-Gomhoria theatre*

For 10 days, dancing seemed to dominate the performance scene in Cairo and Alexandria and provide the most exciting artistic expressions and explorations. The visit of the world-famous German Das Folkswang Tanzstudio from Essen on 11 and 12 of this month with an exhilarating work called *Lakenhal* (The Cloth Factory in Flemish), was a major highlight and sent everybody, young and old, into raptures. The title, which refers to the many cloth factories and exquisite linen fabrics for which the Flemish people are famed, as the printed programme said, was a bit mystifying at first, since nothing remotely connected with cloth-making could be seen on stage – unless you viewed the stage itself, with the many linen sheets framing it and stretching across it, at different points, from the flies to the floor, as a kind of loom on which choreographer Henrietta Horn (also a gifted dancer and the current co-artistic director of this 75-year-old company with Pina Bausch) set about weaving and unrevaling the bodies of her dancers. You soon discover, however, that the title refers more to Horn's source of inspiration than to any particular subject or message. The German-Belgian-French-Dutch history and heritage of Flanders, once an old, medieval principality, is metaphorically woven, through dance and music, into an intricate cultural-emotional vista where the conflict of wills – of who dances to whose tune and who leads the band – becomes the source of dramatic tension and the force that propels the show along.

* 19.2.2004.

Brilliantly choreographed, with plenty of imaginative flair and intelligent humour, *Lakenhal* unfolded against a richly varied musical background which included works by the Brussels-born Jacques Brel, the Banda de Tontontepec, the Fanfare Ciocarlia (an 11-man brass and woodwind band from the village of Zece Prajini near the Romanian-Moldavian border), as well as *The Four Elements* by the 16th century German music publisher and composer Tielman Susato who became the official town trumpeter in Antwerp in 1525. Indeed, music cut a high profile in this show and seemed, together with the lighting, more like a driving, dramatic force than a mere accompaniment. The interaction between body and sound went through many modulations and the musical impact was enhanced by calculated periods of silence, where only the breathing of the young, versatile, multinational dancers could be heard as they mimed violent confrontations, obstinately resisted being physically manipulated, or rushed around mechanically like an army obeying orders. At many points, as the dancers gracefully threaded their way through the many white screens lining the stage, tantalizingly appearing and disappearing, one was vividly reminded of such childish, popular games as hide-and-seek and now-you-see-it-now-you-don't. I suppose this is how the history of any nation appears to one and *Lakenhal* was ultimately a metaphoric expression of an artist's perspective on the history of Flanders. Conceived with great subtlety and wit, *Lakenhal* was alternately funny, lyrical, aggressive, bewitchingly sensual, or pensively nostalgic; but whatever the mood, it was consistently effervescent, elegant and richly poetic.

Back on the Silk Road:

Reflections on the political underpinnings of cultural encounters at the Silk Road 2004 theatre festival in Mulheim*

My trip to the Theater an der Ruhr followed hot on the heels of the Cairo International Festival for Experimental Theatre and coincided with the Frankfurt book fair where Arab culture was guest of honour this year. The event I was heading for was yet another East/West cultural encounter – a Middle Eastern/European theatrical landscape staged at the Theater an der Ruhr in Mulheim, Germany. Viewed together, the three events offered interesting points of comparison and triggered a chain of thought centering on cultural dialogue and interchange and their relation to politics, ideology, and the question of identity.

The CIFET is a governmental festival which, however much it pretends to independence, has to follow the directives of Egyptian foreign policy and the ministry of interior. The indiscriminate ban on Israeli artists, including those who fight for the rights of the Palestinians and a just, peaceful resolution of the conflict, is perhaps understandable in view of the brutal practices of Israeli forces in the occupied territories, the anti-normalisation stand of the majority of Egyptian intellectuals and the general popular feeling in the country. What is not understandable is the ban on Iranian artists. For three years now they have been trying to join the festival and been denied at the last minute by arbitrary orders from up on high. Though Iranian cinema is

* 28.10.2004. In Arabic, German, Persian, Kurdish and English.

occasionally hosted in Egyptian film festivals, Iranian theatre troupes remain suspect, as if their mere physical presence would instantaneously ignite an Islamic revolution and topple the regime. The fact that theatre in Iran has been rapidly developing in recent years into a resistance site – an effective vehicle for protest and opposition, advocating liberalisation and human rights, and opposing extreme right-wing Islamic conservatism does not seem to cut any ice with the bureaucrats over here. To see an Iranian theatre troupe in Egypt, it seems we have to wait until relations betrween the governments of the two countries have improved.

Arab troupes, on the other hand, with very few exceptions, are either nominated by their governments or have to be approved by them. They won't be accepted otherwise and this puts them in a false position, branding them as representatives of their regimes, regardless of their work, and invariably generates an aggressive, self-defensive attitude and jingoistic, competitive feelings which colour and, indeed, distort their perception and reception of each other's work. Curiously or, perhaps, significantly, such feelings and attitudes do not come into play where non-Arab works are concerned; these are viewed and judged with a remarkable degree of objectivity and discernment. To put it bluntly, Arabs suspect Arabs, find it difficult to work collectively and collaboratively in official contexts, and tend to put more trust in and work better with foreigners.

This could explain, perhaps, why the performances of Arab writers invited as individuals to the Frankfurt affair by the German partners were more forceful and made a better impression than those given by the ones picked by Arab officials and bureaucrats. Nora Amin, for instance, was not a member of the official Egyptian literary delegation,

and yet her two poems in English, *Arab* and *Muslim*, which take an honest look at both labels in the light of her personal experience and question their implications, had a strong impact on her audience and aroused the interest of publishers. It is also pronouncedly the reason why the work of the selection committee for the CIFET contest is always entrusted to Westerners while the head of the international jury is always American or European – to guard against any suspicion of prejudice or favourtism, says Fawzi Fahmi, the chairman of the festival, defending this policy. The fact that the contest of Les Journées Théatrales de Carthage in Tunisia, which is limited to Arab countries and judged by an all-Arab jury, invariably triggers a lot of ugly bickering and bitter feuds seems to corroborate his argument. Not that the choices of the CIFET foreign selection committee are always unanimously regarded with favour; while Arabs admitted to the contest will feel proud that they have been approved by the superiour, Western 'other' and hail the committee's objectivity, those excluded will often seek to comfort themselves by dismissing its decisions as politically suspect, serving some secret agenda. I have often written against the CIFET contest not only because occasionally it can put a feather in the cap of an autocratic or totalitarian regime, but also because it unfailingly sours the mood of the event and creates bad blood among artists. However, if there is one good thing that has come out of it over the years, it is that it has pricked many illusions, unmasking the crisis of trust among Arabs, their deep insecurity which can drive them to seek shelter in the past or in some rigid, dogmatic and often belligerent interpretation of their religious creeds, and their painfully ambivalent feelings about themselves, each other and their previous colonial masters.

In view of this, the label 'Arab culture', this year hosted at Frankfurt, needs to be questioned and rethought. Underlying it is a facile, comforting assumption that deep down all Arabs are basically the same and all possess a single, homogeneous, stable and finished Arab identity. Such an assumption can only lead to stereotypical images and cliches, often borrowed from the Western perception of what constitutes an Arab. This is the trap into which the Arab participation in Frankfurt (as heavily official and politically framed and stage-managed as the CIFET) fell – the trap of generalisation which Edward Said has designated in the opening chapter of *Orientalism* as one of "the features of Orientalist projection": "...to make out of every observable detail a generalisation and out of every generalisation an immutable law about the Oriental nature, temperament, mentality, custom, or type; and, above all, to transmute living reality into the stuff of texts."

One can credibly speak of an Arab world – meaning a group of geographically neighbouring, multi-ethnic, predominantly Muslim states where the population in each speaks a local version of classical Arabic, thickly interlaced with words, echoes and rhythms which belong to earlier languages, cultures and historical periods. But for the term Arab culture to make any sense at all, it has to be viewed as a plural entity (Arab cultures rather than culture) and understood as an ongoing, dialogic historical process – a rich composite of heterogeneous elements, shaped and held together by historical forces and pressures and constantly redefined by its internal tensions and relations to other cultural conglomerates – East, West, North and South. Without recognising this diversity and initiating an inter-Arab dialogue which stresses the differences between the various regions and societies as much as the similarities it would be difficult to establish an

authentic dialogue with other cultures. Indeed, within each Arab society there are diverse cultural groupings or subcultures which the dominant, official culture needs to acknowledge, engage in dialogue and accommodate. For if members of the same family cannot talk to each other and accept their difference, how can they hope to communicate with their next-door neighbours or those further afield?

Cultural exposure, exchange and dialogue were at the heart of the event in Mulheim. As part of the Silk Road project launched by Roberto Ciulli in 1998 with the aim of forging cultural ties between theatre artists in countries along the ancient trade-route from Europe to China, it was inherently, profoundly political; but, fortunately, unlike the CIFET or the Arab presence in Frankfurt, it had no official political framework and steered clear of general cultural labels. Though all the guest performers from the Middle East came from Muslim countries – Iran, Turkey, Tunisia, Oman and the region of Kurdistan in Northern Iraq – they were not identified to the public by their religion or lumped together in the publicity notices as representing Islamic culture; rather, the festival sought to stress and celebrate the diversity, specificity and richness of their respective cultures, and by so doing hoped to combat the Western stereotypes of Muslim women and men, dispel from the minds of its audience the media association of Islam with terrorism, and help them to see Muslims as real people and individuals.

Any German who has attended the Silk Road 2004 festival and watched even a few of its eight guest performances would think twice before dismissing all Arabs or Muslims as terrorists. The Iranians in particular made a wonderful impression and achieved in two nights, with two performances, in terms of correcting the image of their

compatriots and culture, what foreign diplomacy cannot hope to achieve in years with an army of politicians and diplomats. The Tajrobe-ye Now Theatre's *Red Water*, an epic production in the high, declamatory mode, written and directed by Asghar Khalili, drew on history and ancient heroic narratives for material and on the old popular dramatic tradition known as *Ta'ziyeh* for formal inspiration, scenic design and style of acting. It came across as a passionate cry against war as the river between two neighbouring, warring nations (think of the Arabian Gulf) rapidly filled with human blood, becoming the red water of the title. Though the rulers of the two nations – a man and a woman – are in love, they cannot put and end to the blood bath once it starts.

The other Iranian production, the Leev Theatre's impressive two-hander, *Milbusamet wa Aschk* (Kiss You and Tears), written by Mohammed Charmshir and directed by Mohammed Aghebati was equally politically impelled but struck a different note and addressed a different issue. Based on the letters written in prison by the Czech playwright and former president Vaclav Havel to his wife Olga, it focused on ideological oppression, the plight of nonconformist individuals in totalitarian regimes, and the pain and isolation which political dissention and ideological defiance cause on the personal level, in one's private life and most intimate relations. The play was in Persian; and though I could not understand a word of what was being said, the power and eloquence of the acting and stage images were such that I was deeply moved by it. The play's blend of horror and humour, savagery and tenderness, emotional truth-to-life and absurdist elements, as well as its ascetic economy and intense concentration seemed to owe much to Havel's own style of writing, particularly in the later plays which have strong autobiographical overtones. That Charmshir's text

was able to transcend the language barrier is a credit to director Aghebati, his two talented actors and set and lighting designers.

Though the setting of the play is a prison cell, Aghebati quite perversely opts for the least used of stage forms and most difficult for actors and designers – the *traverse*, in which the action takes place as if in a passage or corridor between the audience. Structurally analogous to the medieval processional form, as Julian Hilton notes in *Performance*, this shape is "appropriate to the portrayal of a journey or a quest," which, if we understand 'journey' and 'quest' literally as physical progression in space, *Kiss You and Tears* is not. It is only as the play progresses that you begin to perceive the significance of Aghabati's choice of the traverse and the many ironies it creates. The cell which has for walls only the audience, sitting on two sides, tells you that by keeping silent we all become colluders in the crimes of tyranny; and as the ideas of passage and movement implied in the traverse shape clash with the prisoner's immobility and the fact of his incarceration, the paradoxical stage-image sparks off other meanings, suggesting that in totalitarian societies no real progress is possible, that all the roads lead to the cell, and the only movement possible is in and out of it. And yet the quest for freedom and the promise of moving on remain in sight throughout the play, enshrined in the physical reality of the traverse shape and its ancestral processional associations.

The choice of the traverse dictates minimal sets and props, and indeed, apart from a white floor, two black trunks, a cleaning pail, two metal plates and two spoons, Aghebati used none. The same minimalist tendency extended to the colour palette of the show which consisted solely of white, grey and black. Music was also kept to a bare minimum

and excerpts from Havel's letters, read in a voice-over, opened and closed the play and punctuated his successive encounters with his persecutors before the final meeting with his wife. The actor who played Havel was convincing and moving, but the real impact of the play depended on the performance of that young, attractive actress who, in a grey trouser-suit, a black shawl and a knitted black cap to cover her hair, played all the other parts in quick succession, wearing the shawl in different ways to indicate the character changes and altering her voice, gait, body language and general demeanour to suit each like a chameleon. That a very young actress could display such versatility was truly amazing and evidenced the rich talent resources in Iranian theatre and the seriousness and dedication of its artists. Equally amazing was the boldness of the performance, not only on account of its subject or the degree of physical contact between the actors it allowed, but, more importantly, because in the first catechism scene it represented the priest as a veiled Muslim woman wearing the traditional, black, Iranian veil, thus identifying religious with political oppression and condemning both.

In *Le Pareti della Solitudine* (The Deepest Solitude) from The Teatro Metastasio in Italy, directed by Massimo Luconi, we pondered a different kind of oppression and solitude – the cultural. Based on a story by Taher Ben Jelloun about the suffering and loneliness of African and Arab immigrants in Europe, the play took the form of a dramatic monologue delivered by a man dragging a big trunk containing all his possessions and memories through what seems like a wasteland littered with lighted human masks in metal tubs. At certain points his words were accompanied by the voice of an African singer-percussionist and the tunes of an Italian clarinetist standing in the

shadowy background. And while the music and sad, nostalgic African songs punctuated the monologue, deepening its pathos, the stage scene superimposed the image of city lights at night on one of a cemetery in a poignant visual metaphor. The poignancy reaches a peak when finally the immigrant lies down on his trunk to die, turning it into a coffin, and draws part of the white drapes at the back over him like a shroud, as if covering himself with clouds or a bit of the sky.

But cultural dialogue could also be conducted in music and one of the most interesting items in the festival was a concert entitled *Music along the Silk-road* by the Golestan Quintet which mixes Western and Eastern instruments and includes players from Italy, Iran and Turkey. Led by Novit Afrouz on the piano, Parvaneh Hosseyni (tar), Ayse Gulec (qanun), Amirahmad Rastbod (kemanche) and Romano Pucci (flute) treated us to old, traditional music from the heritage of Turkey and Iran as well as famous favourites by Bach. There was traditional music from Oman as well, magnificently played on an Omani bagpipe by Ragab Khamis Sanad Al-Selim, himself a wonderful dancer and the founder and leader of a folk-dance troupe of four men and four women who accompanied his playing with folkloric courting and wedding dances. Indeed, whenever the guest artists met, in or out of the theatre, before or after the shows, there were always songs – in Kurdish, Persian, Turkish or Omani Arabic – bringing people together and proving that real cultural exchange works best on the level of individuals and small groups and away from politicians and governments.

Italian

A Taste of Italian Vintage

The Egyptian premiere of Eduardo De Filippo's *Filumena Marturano* at the National theatre*

It is a pity the great Samiha Ayoub, one of our finest stage actresses, never got to play the title role in *Filumena Marturano* as she had passionately wanted and planned to do in the eighties. It was at her own initiative that the Italian Cultural Centre in Cairo commissioned Salama Mohamed Soliman at the time to translate this play which was first brought to the attention of the Egyptian public through Vittorio De Sica's successful film version of it in 1964 under the title *Matrimonio all'Italiano*. The translation (in classical Arabic) was accomplished and published by the Centre, but the production did not materialise. The eighties were turbulent years for Ayoub and she was often at loggerheads with the establishment which cost her at one point her post as director of the National Theatre.

When Hoda Wasfi, the present director of the National, decided to revive the project, it was already too late for Ayoub to do the part. The time had passed. A competent actress, more suited to the character age-wise (Filumena is 47 in the play), and preferably with star quality was needed. Curiously, the choice fell on Dalal Abdel-Aziz who is still in her thirties, looks young and voluptuous, and whose stage credits consist solely of vaudevilles and spectacular musical comedies which showcase her dancing skills and sex appeal. It was a risk for the theatre and a challenge for Abdel-Aziz and many had grave doubts about her ability to cope. Her performance, however, despite occasional slips into

* 10.12.1998. In Arabic.

sentimentality and a spot or two of excessive emotionalism, has proved that with a little more experience, confidence, better control and more subtle manipulation and tuning of voice and gesture, she can develop into a fine serious actress with a powerful presence and a wide emotional range. With the help of make-up which made her look much older, and plain, homely costumes, she projected a convincing and deeply sympathetic image of the ignorant, common, and emotionally battered former prostitute who first steals money from her lover of 25 years to support her three illegitimate sons, then tricks him into marrying her in a death bed ceremony to obtain for them social respectability and financial security. Luckily for Abdel-Aziz, she had a sensitive, meticulous and taxing Italian director, Mariano Regilio, to guide her, and a strong cast which includes some of the finest acting talents in the National, and is led by the magnificent Yehia El-Fakharani (as the wealthy, vain and selfish Don Domenico Soriano) to support her.

The unconventional and earthy morality of the play which condones unlawful sex, theft and deception, and rates the social and financial interests of the sons above truth and honesty is unusual in the Egyptian theatre and would be shocking and quite unacceptable in an Egyptian drama. What helps the predominantly middle class and conservative patrons of the National to swallow it every night — apart from Filumena's emphatic declaration of repentance and her extensive and detailed description of the rigours of poverty that drove her to prostitution in her early youth, her passionate longing for a decent, respectable life, and her vehement denouncement of abortion — is the palpable "foreignness" of the play. Though presented in colloquial Arabic (Mustafa Saad prepared the colloquial version) and retitled

Gawaza Taliani (An Italian Marriage), no attempt was made to adapt it, Egyptianise it, or interfere in any way with the original text. The setting remains the hall-cum-dining room in Soriano's house in Naples (a beautiful neat white and grey set designed by Mahmoud Hanafi who also designed the costumes with careful attention to colour, detail and texture), the characters keep their Italian names and Catholic faith, the references are all Italian, and so is the music (with some delicious Neapolitan songs played before and after the performance, and during the interval), and even the by now old-fashioned and unfamiliar (at least to Egyptians) division of the play into three acts (instead of the usual two "parts") is also kept. This disconcerted some members of the audience, and on the two occasions I watched the play I heard one or two people exclaim in bewilderment when the curtain came down after the first act: "Whoever heard of a part that lasts only 35 minutes!"

It was a real and refreshing treat to watch for once a foreign play untampered with; this has become quite rare in the Egyptian mainstream theatre, and Hoda Wasfi was very wise to entrust the first Egyptian production of *Filumena Marturano* to Mariano Regilio who has long and wide experience of the Neapolitan dialect theatre and especially the work of Eduardo De Filippo. The fact that I am not particularly fond of *Filumena*, find its central "honest whore" figure boring, its traditional dramatic structure unexciting, its exalted, uncritical view of motherhood, marriage and the family smug and parochial, its harping on respectability and money stuffy and a bit too bourgeois, and would have preferred a more provocative play from the Italian repertoire, a Pirandello for instance, does not make me value the production any less. It is a serious and brave attempt on Wasfi's part to revive the long-forgotten tradition of respect for dramatic texts, foreign and local,

which we had in the sixties and the interest in world drama, and to stem the tide of adaptations which has flooded the Egyptian stage.

Having seen many perfectly respectable and good texts wantonly meddled with and messed up (the most recent was Tawfiq Al-Hakim's *Shams Al-Nahar* or Morning Sun), I shudder to think what would have happened to *Filumena Marturano* in the hands of an Egyptian director. It would have, in all probability, been transplanted to Egypt, Filumena and Soriano, now Muslims with Egyptian names, would not be living in sin but secretly married, or at least having the Islamically accepted form of common law marriage called *'urfi*, the sons would, therefore, be legitimate and all fathered by Soriano without his knowledge, the virgin whom Filumena encounters would become a sheikh, and, more importantly, Filumena's past life which she describes in the second act would be dramatised and visually projected on stage in a series of melodramatic and gaudy scenes, with plenty of singing, dancing, ribaldry, sexual innuendos and risqué jokes. Instead of a prostitute in a brothel, Filumena would probably become a belly dancer in a sleazy nightclub, thinly clad, but fiercely guarding her honour, that is her virginity, until Soriano marries her in secret. The poverty of her family which drives her to the nightclub would be effectively displayed with the help of music and lyrics (from the pen of a hack song writer), and the lives of the three hidden sons would be extremely gone into and amply revealed. By the time the adaptor has done all this, or even half of it, he will have stretched the one and a half hour play into a four hour show. Some people, particularly the clientele of the commercial threatre, will doubtless enjoy such a version. Personally I am grateful to Wasfi, Regilio, and his disciplined cast and crew that they spared me such horrors.

Teasing Ambivalences

Pirandello's *Six Characters in Search of an Author* at the AUC*

It is amazing that despite the wide popularity of Pirandello among Egyptian theatre scholars, critics, playwrights and directors and the far-reaching influence on theatre makers of his formal experiments, particularly his meta-theatrical dramatic triptych, *Six Characters in Search of an Author*, *Each in His Own Way*, and *Tonight We Improvise*, only two of his plays were staged in Egypt before the current production of *Six Characters in Search of an Author* at the AUC. Director Mahmoud El-Sabba' (1911-1989), who had studied theatre in London and Dublin in the late 1930s at his own expense and come under the influence of the new trends in European theatre, met with violent opposition when he proposed introducing unconventional plays, such as Pirandello's, to the Egyptian public. It was not until 1962, after the arrival of Brecht's epic theatre and Absurd drama on the scene and the founding of the Pocket Theatre by Sa'd Ardash as a launching pad for avant-garde experiments, that he was able to stage *Six Characters*, and even then, he couldn't whip up enough enthusiasm to have it sponsored by any of the state theatre companies. The production was finally mounted by Gam'iyyat Ansar El-Tamthil (Acting Champions Society) under his direction, with amateur and semi-professional actors.

* 13.11.2003. In English.

It would be interesting to know how the 1962 production of *Six Characters* fared with the audience and critics. Unfortunately, I could find no written record of this, and of the many people I talked to, few could remember it, and only vaguely; it seems to have had a very short run and excited little interest. For the next Egyptian production of a Pirandello play we have to wait for thirty-six years. In 1998, Huda Wasfi, then head of the National, decided it was time to air Pirandello in Arabic once more and opted for his uncontroversial masterpiece, *Henry IV*. For a director, she contracted the Italian Walter Manfre who cast veteran actor Ashraf Abdel Ghafour in the title role and TV star Nadia Rashad as Countess Matilda Spina, his old mistress. It was a good production, austere, moving and intermittently funny in a subtle vein. Nevertheless, it was sparsely attended, critically denounced and barely survived three weeks. It was generally thought to be cold and lacking in immediacy and relevance. One is tempted to think that in the hands of an Egyptian director, in a more adulterated form that played down the intellectual questioning of reality and illusion and foregrounded the comic potential of the situation, it might have gone down better with the public.

In the introduction to his English translation of *Six Characters*, Frederick May has described the play as "the dramatic analogue of *The Waste Land* ... a high poetic record of the disillusionment and spiritual desolation of its time." It is here perhaps that one should seek an explanation for the ambivalent attitude towards Pirandello that has persisted in Egypt since the 1960s: the avid admiration and zestful imitation of his formal innovations and the shying away from the vision which impelled the form. As in the case of absurd drama, the philosophical underpinnings of which ran counter to the underlying

assumptions of Islamic culture as well as to the revolutionary mood of that era and its highly politicised theatre, Pirandello's profound scepticism, his unsettling reflections on the nature of reality and identity — the elusiveness, relativity and illusoriness of the former and the multiplicity and fluidity of the latter – must have proved hard to swallow and viewed as reactionary and politically subversive. Though dramatists like Mahmoud Diab, in *Layali El-Hasad* (Harvest Nights), and Yusef Idris, in *Al-Mazalah Al-Ardiyyah* (Global Farce), have exploited the theme of the mystery of identity to generate suspense and demonstrate the unknowability of the truth, what attracted most writers and directors to Pirandello was his dismantling of the conventions of realism and his openly theatrical investigation of the many conflicting planes of reality and illusion which go into the making of theatre. While Pirandello's texts were safely kept off the boards, the meta-theatrical form he launched in his famous trilogy of the theatre (shorn of any philosophical implications) was repeatedly drawn on, particularly in plays which sought to revive the popular theatrical heritage. Though Yusef Idris claimed in 1965 to have found the inspiration for his groundbreaking *Al-Farafir* (The Underlings) in *Al-Samer Al-Sha'bi* (an old, indigenous form of communal entertainment), as did Mahmoud Diab in connection with *Harvest Nights*, the influence of Pirandello was quite palpable in both plays, as the critics were quick to note.

Soon after the National's *Henry IV*, a foreign company (Ukrainian I think it was) brought *Six Characters* to the Cairo International Festival for Experimental Theatre and did it in toto; it failed dismally. Despite powerful acting and a seductive, thinly clad Stepdaughter (an unfailing attraction for festival audiences), on the two successive nights it performed at the Puppet Theatre, the audience started fidgeting

halfway through the first part, and after the interval only a quarter of them returned to their seats.

Where did the fault lie? I wondered: with the audience? the production? or the play itself? I went back to the text and tried to read it away from the influence of all the glowing critical assessments and passionate encomiums I had swallowed over the years. It wasn't easy; but at the end, and quite reluctantly, I had to admit that a lot of what must have seemed shocking and revolutionary in 1921, the year the play was written – the meta-theatrical form, the collapsing of the barriers between life and art, the relativity of truth, the idea that reality as well as subjectivity were consensual fictional constructions, as well as the fragmentary, multifaceted nature of awareness whether of the self or the other – has become familiar and even mundane. In *Zerox and Infinity*, Jean Baudrillard writes: "We used to live in the imaginary world of the mirror, of the divided self and of the stage, of otherness and alienation." Was that the world Pirandello tried to capture in *Six Characters* in 1921? "Today," Baudrillard continues, "we live in the amaginary world of the screen ... All our machines are screens. We too have become screens, and the interactivity of men has become the interactivity of screens." In his analysis of contemporary culture, Baudrillard identifies our world, in the words of Richard Catlett Wilkerson, as "a hyperreal world where models of reality dominate and reality itself has given way to simulations of the real, and eventually to simulations of simulations that have no anchor, nor interest in the real whatsoever." This is a far cry from Pirandello's world of merging illusions and shifting planes of reality.

I reread the play again before going to see it in Frank Bradley's production at the Falaki Centre and once more, like the jaded critic I seem to have become, I felt it was somewhat verbose and overwritten and found the discussion of the nature of theatrical illusion, mimesis, and impersonation a bit laboured, intrusive and patronizing. Worse still, I failed to sympathise with any of the six characters deserted by their author and deprived of a text, and the story of a young woman driven to prostitution by poverty and saved at the eleventh hour from sleeping with her stepfather struck me as too embarrassingly melodramatic. The fact that all Pirandello's interesting musings on the impossibility of human communication, and on reality and the unified self as mere illusions are earnestly voiced through the selfish, loquacious "Father", without the slightest hint of irony, in an effort to exonerate himself, make them sound forced and obtrusive. This may sound blasphemous and I don't know whether, or how far Bradley shares my feelings about the text. In his production, however, he managed a subtle change of perspective which tipped the balance of dramatic power and sympathy in favour of The Director and The Actors rather than The Father and his family. This seemed to put things right for me and remove a major source of irritation.

Rather than a commercial theatre, a smug, ridiculous director and a bunch of shallow, vain and cliché-ridden professional actors such as we find in the original text, Bradley presented us with a group of young AUC students assisting a fellow theatre student with her graduation project. The proposed play is Beckett's *End-game* rather than "*The Game As He Played It* ... by Pirandello" the text mentions and which Pirandello, in a conscious, ironical gesture of self-vindication, makes the obtuse Director grumble about and describe as tedious and

ridiculous. The substitution of the AUC for Pirandello's imaginary theatre and of fresh, eager, real students for blasé, complacent, fictional professionals, with the alterations in the dialogue this entailed, gave the initial, hilarious rehearsal scene an unmistakable ring of truth and established a firm baseline of reality, a warm bond of sympathy and a definite perspective. Whatever followed we viewed from the point of view of the young female Director and her assistants, and at every step we shared their bewilderment, anxiety, frustrations and gradual dawning of awareness. I experienced the play in this production as a learning process I shared with the Director and her actors, as a disturbing but illuminating collective dream, or dip into the unconscious (not unlike the lovers' in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*), as a painful, inevitable rite of passage from the blissful ignorance of innocence to the sadness of knowledge and experience.

As The Director in Bradley's new interpretation, Mariam Ali Mahmoud, whom I have admired in many previous AUC productions, had the difficult task of providing the emotional focus and gravitational point of the show, and she amply fulfilled it. Her obvious urge to do what she thought was best both for the Six Characters and artistically speaking became the human face of the play. Her Director was a practical, energetic young woman, with a forceful, commanding personality, but gentle, sensitive and innately courteous underneath, with a warm, affectionate nature and a generous capacity for sympathetic understanding. With her jeans, flat shoes, bottle of water, green jacket and socks and pony tail, she looked touchingly young – a person one cared what happened to and wanted to shield. Though she had her back to us most of the time, one could read her feelings in her posture and tension of her muscles, and the look of genuine shock and

helpless bewilderment on her face at the beginning, on first seeing the characters, and the pose of gentle, philosophical sadness and pensive reflection at the end, as she sat alone on the empty stage, framed the meaning of this production of *Six Characters* as a journey towards a more profound understanding of the complexities and paradoxes of human existence as well as of the art of theatre.

Mariam's performance was bolstered by Dalliah El-Badry, Maha El-Swais and Laila Soliman who gave her valuable, unobtrusive support. The rest of the cast, though some of them seemed at a loss sometimes as to what the play was all about or in which direction it was ultimately moving, did a fair job on the whole within the scope allotted each. The one really jarring note in this respect was Jasmine Sobhi's performance as The Stepdaughter which, in turn, negatively affected that of Luke Lehner as The Father. Moving lightly, with studied grace, like a ballet dancer, with her toes touching the ground first, a manner of walking hardly suited to the character of a brazen prostitute, she barked her lines inarticulately at everybody in a monotonous high pitch that became intolerably irritating after a while. She was much better in the silent scenes, particularly her meeting with The Father in Madame Pace's parlour, when her body language came into play and held the stage. So all is not past remedy. What Jasmine urgently needs is plenty of voice training and enunciation lessons.

Stancil Campbell's geometrically austere, all black set of a bare stage, with a catwalk and service ladders, which at certain significant points was plunged into total darkness or burst into breathtaking fiery red or sky blue (he also designed the lighting) was at once beautiful and functional and created many physical levels which corresponded to the

multiple planes of reality and illusion in the play. Especially unforgettable was the lighting of the six characters at the beginning and end when suddenly one side of the dark back wall became transparent and the figures appeared in silhouette, against a black background, as if in a void, with a bright light from the back providing their outlines. At the beginning, the combination of black, grey and dusty beige in the set and characters' costumes gave the stage an oppressively drab look. But as the characters began to enact their story, with the help of The Director, and bits of furniture and props were brought in, the stage seemed to spring to life and acquire a more cheerful, lively aspect. This is not in Pirandello's stage directions and I took it as an indirect tribute by Bradley and Campbell to the power and beauty of theatrical illusions. In other respects, too, Bradley did not follow the text's meticulously detailed directions. The most significant divergences occur at the end where, unlike Pirandello, Bradley brings all six characters on stage, including The Boy and The Little Girl, both of whom we have just seen dead, taking his cue from The Father's earlier words that, as fictional characters, they could never change or die. Bradley also instructed The Stepdaughter to take off her mask before stepping off the stage into the auditorium. It made sense: without relinquishing her immortal status as artistic fabrication, symbolised by the mask, she could not logically break free. But the most significant detail which clinches Bradley's fresh reading of the play was, as I mentioned before, the sight of the young director, sitting pensively on the empty stage when everybody had gone, then finding the Characters, all Six of them, materialising once more.

Arlecchino in Cairo

Goldoni's *The Servant of Two Masters* at Al-Gomhoria theatre*

In November, 1994, at the Stadthalle, Mulheim, in Germany, I watched the premiere of the Theater an der Ruhr's production of Carlo Goldoni's *The Servant of Two Masters*. One look at the stage and I was almost convinced I had strayed into the wrong theatre. Visually, there was nothing to connect it with Goldoni's world – a grey, metallic set, featuring the basement of some grand hotel, leading to a car park, with many lifts whizzing up and down at frantic speed all the time, gambling and snooker tables hung over with low lamps and people in 1920s suits with suspenders, shod in spats. The text had been extensively adapted by the company's resident dramaturge, Helmut Schafer and transposed to New York and the Mafia circles, with an expatriate Turkish Kurd actor in the titular role of the servant. Masterminding the whole operation was Italian-German director Roberto Ciulli, the founder of the company. No classical text is safe when Ciulli is around. He uses them as material for improvisation with his actors, subjecting them to drastic interpretations, what you could call a process of systematic gutting out, and occasionally pits them, in a kind of ferocious cockfight, against other literary or historical material. His purpose in all this is to come out at the end with a politically relevant script that touches the audience on the raw and reflects his and his actors' vision of the world around them. This has been the practice of the company for many years and though

* 15.1.2004. In Italian.

the results may not be always to everybody's liking, they are invariably exciting and provocative.

I cannot pretend I liked Ciulli's version of *The Servant* at the time; it struck me as too harsh and grim and too much of an adulteration. I missed all the joy and colour one usually associates with Goldoni's plays – the sense of a world ultimately, and in spite of the most horrendous complications, at peace with itself and capable of resolving its conflicts. But the impact of that show was, nevertheless, tremendous. It was as if Ciulli and his dramaturge and actors had done to the play what King Lear had wanted to do to Regan: to anatomize her to see the evil that breeds round her heart. They had rent the glossy surface of the play to bare the facts of cultural, racial and class oppression that underlie the position and funny antics of Arlecchino (or Truffaldino – as he is called in the play). From then on, I could never revisit *The Servant*, *La Locandiera* (The Mistress of the Inn), or any of my favourite Goldoni plays without the shadow of that wistful, Kurdish Arlecchino coming between me and the action and sending me off on a perilous deconstructivist course.

The world-acclimated production of *Arlecchino servitore di due padroni* by II Piccolo Teatro di Milano-Teatro d'Europa, directed by Giogrio Strehler and starring the magnificent Feruccio Soleri (which visited Cairo last week in the context of the Italia-Egitto, 2003-2004 cultural event), did its best to cure me of this desonstructivist malaise which I had been long resenting. It attempted to recover for the audience the beauty, unadulterated humour, innocent charm and sunny cast of mind they have traditionally come to expect of the play. The elements Goldoni borrowed from the *commedia dell'arte* – the disguise

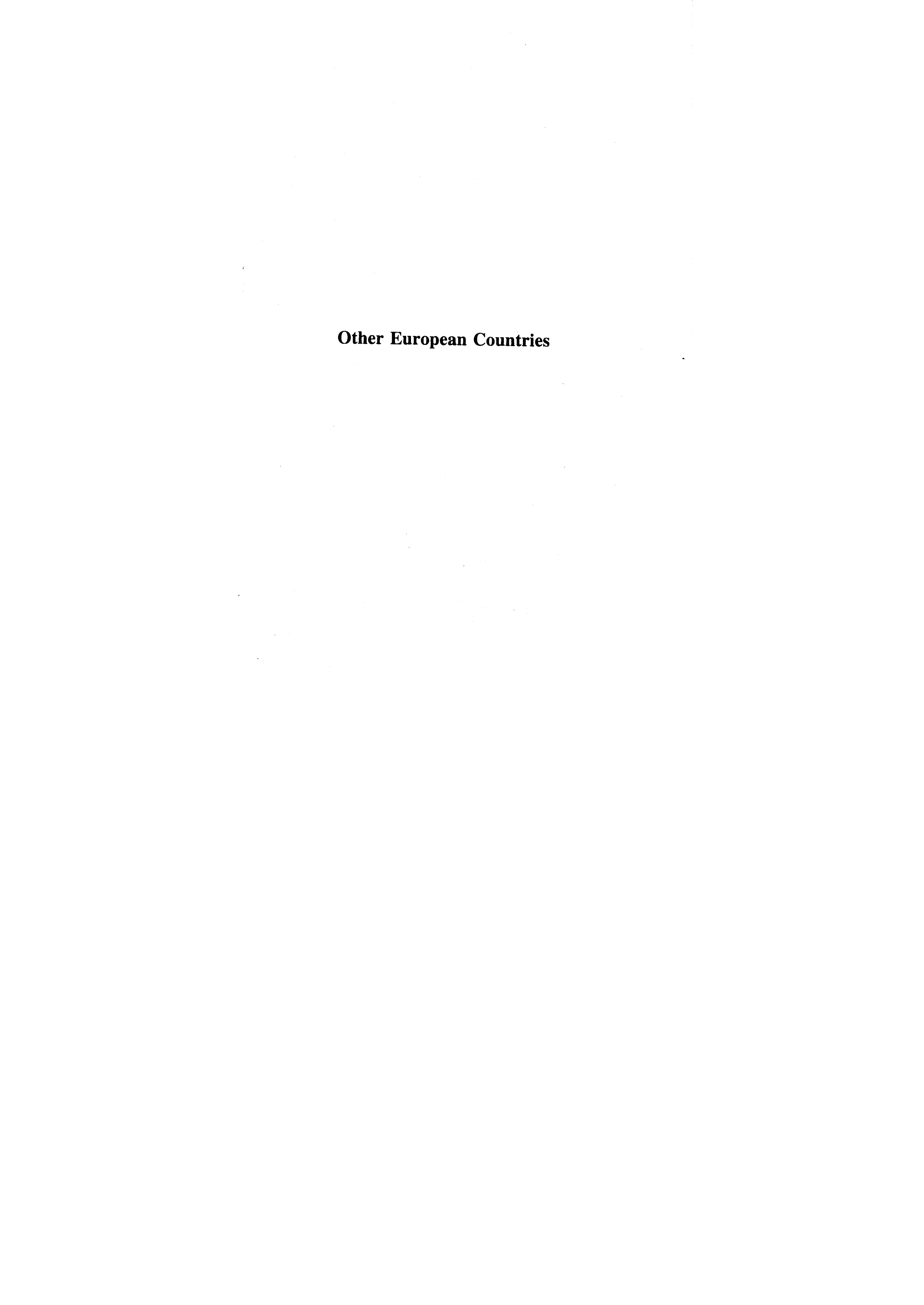
which leads to many entanglements, the mock duels, the complicated plot with a last minute revelation that saves all, the galloping rhythm, the improvised jokes and, of course, the stock figures of Pantalone, the sentimental lovers, the clever, flirtatious soubrette, and Arlecchino (Truffaldino), as both *primum mobile* and comic butt – were all there in their reassuring conventional forms, masks and costumes. The show unfolded in the posh and comfortable Gomhoria theatre smoothly, hilariously, reassuringly, with everyone gasping at the wonderful craftsmanship of the performers, thrilling to their singing, applauding their nimbleness and agility, their masterful command of stylized acting, and feasting their eyes on their colourful, gorgeous costumes. For me, however, it felt like a merry marionette show, taken out of cold storage, regarnished and offered for consumption as a light soufflé easy on the digestion. Nothing to irk, disturb or unsettle here; just pure entertainment.

And what is wrong with that? Nothing, except that it calls the very concept of 'pure entertainment' into question. Can one really dissociate oneself from the reality around one and take a holiday through theatre into some imaginary, far-off land? What a relief if one could, and I did try. Strehler's vintage piece, however, started to pall after a while, feeling more and more, as the minutes ticked away, and despite all the performer's gusto and vivid clowning, like a museum piece rather than living theatre. What kept me in my seat was an absurd feeling of loyalty to an old, less fortunate tribe of actors – a feeling that by staying there I was somehow paying homage to the struggling, wandering artistis who had given the world, long ago, from the mid-sixteenth century onwards, the art on which many countries have founded their comic, theatrical traditions, including England and Egypt – namely the

commedia dell'arte.

Think of Francesco Andreini, who was famous for his role as the Capitano and published the material he had created for the character in *Il Capitan Spaventa della Valle Inferna* (Captain Fearsome of the Infernal Vale), then followed it, in 1611, with a collection of fifty scenarios of the comedies presented by his touring company under the title *Il Teatro delle Favole Rappresentative*. His wife, Isabella Andreini, was also a famous actress and poetess who, according to Italian theatre scholar Clelia Falletti, "wrote refined and passionate rhetorical works which supported her roles on stage." Isabella died in child birth, in 1604, in Lyon, France, while on tour. "She had seen many countries and given birth to many children while travelling," Falletti writes in her inspiring article "The Inaccessible Mountain" (*Open Page Journal*, no. 7). Of Isabella's 11 children, only her first born, Giovan Battista, carried on the tradition and founded, with his wife, Virginia Ramponi, one of the most prestigious *commedia dell'arte* companies in the first part of the 17th century. Virginia Ramponi's stage name was Florinda and one of her most famous stage parts was as Florinda in *Lo Schiavetto*, the young woman who disguises herself as a slave-boy (which is what schiavetto means) and roams the world to track down her errant lover, earning her bread by performing in public squares, side by side with thieves and quacks. When in her final speech, Florinda, the character, describes the ordeals and risks she has suffered on the road, she is not, according to Falletti, speaking only "of the vicissitudes the character in the comedy has to confront but also ... of her life as an actress." For in the *commedia dell'arte* tradition, an actor's life was inseparable from his or her profession.

The lives of those early Italian actors were arduous and dangerous. The companies travelled far and wide across Italy in the space of a few months, sometimes pushing into France, Spain, England and Russia, and the perils they had to face, as Falletti records, "were, therefore, many and diverse, particularly for a young and beautiful actress whose only protection was the fragile company of her fellow performers." An added burden was the bad reputation that stigmatised actors at the time. "Actors and charlatans were both regarded very negatively by the censors – not without reason," Falletti adds, "as in reality they formed a single group and there was constant exchange between the two categories." Nevertheless, it was those long dead actors who have evolved for us, through their difficult everyday reality, their perilous travels and incessant struggle for integrity, many of the comic routines and conventions, stock situations and character types that still sustain theatre in many countries right now. Falletti ends her essay with a moving tribute to them – to those "people who chose the freedom of the profession of wandering actors." I remembered her tribute as I watched Soleri performing Arlecchino and wondered whether, with all the acclaim and the comfortable life-style the actors of Il Piccolo Teatro di Milano are enjoying today, he was really a genuine chip of the old block.



Other European Countries

Welcome Visitors

A visiting children's show by the famous Swiss clown Jose Betrix, better known as Trac*

I was particularly fortunate last week; my play-fishing has netted me a thoroughly enjoyable catche: *A Mad Time* was a delightful children's show conceived, directed and performed by the Swiss master of the art of clowning Jose Betrix, in collaboration with the Egyptian clown Ahmed Kamel and two members of the Nile music band.

Shows of this type and calibre have become a rare luxury in Egypt and the need for them is sorely felt by both children and adults. In the provinces, the situation is even worse; the chances of a decent production of a world classic or a children's play ever wandering there are almost nil. This results in a theatrically deprived and undernourished population having to make do with the meagre and mediocre fare that falls their way every now and then at long intervals. The plight of the children is exacerbated by the fact that over-crowding and the shortage of school buildings and funds have practically put paid to the artistic activities, including music and drama, which once formed an integral part of a child's education. It is sad to remember that as early as the 1870s the annual end-of-the-year school-play was a familiar phenomenon, that in 1925 the Ministry of Education made music and drama officially part of the school curriculum in all government schools, and in 1937 the same ministry thought it worth its while to set up a special department to promote and supervise the education of

* 25.11.1993. Mime and Arabic.

drama in schools. Nowadays, except in a few select schools, the school play, the school band, courses in arts and crafts and even sports are a thing of the past.

This deplorable state of affairs makes one appreciate all the more the ambitious project launched five years ago by Pro Helvetia, a Swiss foundation for culture, with the help of the Swiss Embassy in Cairo and the Egyptian Ministry of Culture. Every year one or two Swiss artists are invited to Egypt to devise a show for children in collaboration with a number of Egyptian performers. The guest artists usually come with a very clear conception of the show they intend to do, so rehearsals do not take up a long time; a week or ten days is the average period. When the work is finished, the group set off on a tour of the provinces which lasts for a month, performing at ten or fifteen different locations up and down the valley and spread across the country. It is hard work, but extremely rewarding and satisfying, as Trac and his group admit. Each side learns a lot from being exposed to the other's culture and from exploring possible common grounds and lines of contact. As ideas and skills are shared, the rehearsal period and the actual performances can come to resemble an intensive crash-course in inter-cultural modes of performance.

The shows in the Pro Helvetia project usually rely on mime, movement and music to overcome the language barrier and Trac's *A Mad Time* was no exception. A few short phrases, some folk Egyptian songs, a short prologue and a shorter epilogue were all the language there was. Nor was there any story-line or any didactic message. Like his teacher, the magnificent mime master Rene Quellet who brought us two years ago his unforgettable *Encounters* (again thanks to Pro

Helvetia), Trac manages to recreate on stage the sense of wonder and curiosity with which children view the world. The most familiar objects change their familiar identity as he comes into contact with them; a huge saw becomes a musical instrument, an electrical lamp a candle, a balloon a feeding bottle; and all the time he never loses that subtle air of loss and helplessness typical of both children and clowns. But Trac is not only a superb and original clown, he is also a competent musician who plays many instruments. This accounts, perhaps, for the prominence of music in this show; many sequences were dedicated to the exploration of the different sounds of musical instruments, including a traditional Egyptian '*rabab*' and another, of gigantic proportions, designed especially for the show by Shakir Ismail; and one particularly interesting sequence consists of a musical duel in which Trac takes on single-handed both Shakir Ismail, the *rabab*-player, and Ragab Sadiq, the '*daraboukka*' (Egyptian drum) player. The conflict, however, ends in harmony, with both parties achieving a better understanding and appreciation of each other's traditional music.

Twinklings in a Dark Sky

A Romanian Puppet Show*

The visiting Romanian Tandarica Puppet Theatre provided the brightest spot of the week — a tenderly ironical version of *Cinderella*, projected through the eyes of a delightful family of mice, a daring and clownish mosquito and a cunning soft-spoken spider. Through this theatrical play, the sentimentality of the story, whether in the Grimm Brothers version or that of Charles Perrault, was softened to suit the taste of the cynical adult. To underline his ironical treatment, director Silvio Borkarit chose excerpts from Rossini's opera, *Cinderella*, to accompany his show and the dialogue, alternately melodramatic and farcical, and shot through with well-known Shakespearean phrases, resulted in a hilarious parody of many acting styles. Visually, too, *Cinderella* was thrilling with beautiful designs from Carmen Raszovski and Daniela Voicila emphasising the open theatricality of the director's conception and the theatre-in-theatre structure of the show. The puppeteers booth was designed to look like a dresser-cum-ornaments cabinet, with a red curtain at the top centre, flanked on both sides by small glass boxes containing miniature dolls in Victorian evening dress. The mice inhabited another glass case with a bright orange background at the bottom of the curtain and frequently popped out to sing and dance in front of the main curtained or uncurtained stage or to take part in the main action. On one or two occasions, they dragged Cinderella into their compartment to hide her from the wrath of her step-mother. The

* 24.11.1994.

mosquito, on the other hand, ranged freely everywhere, while the grinning black spider remained fixed to the top of one side of the curtain. But the real highlight of the show and its most original feature was the fairy godmother who, on this occasion, took on the guise of two huge human hands holding a magnified pin by way of a magic wand. Many disliked her in this new from, but when the hands enclosed Cinderella in the moment of magical transformation, the scene became a theatrically stunning metaphor of the power of the artist and an eloquent summing up of the art of puppetry. It was a moment only equalled by the sudden springing to life of the miniature dolls in their glass boxes in the party scene, revolving on their discs in a giddy dance, and by the appearance of the puppeteers at the end of the evening, each carrying her or his puppet.

A European Mix

Compass Berserk at the AUC*

Despite a sophisticated concept and crew, Indji El-Solh's *Compass Berserk* (the meaning of the title eludes me) came across as a bungled ambitious project. Drawing on several dramatic texts from the classical repertoire, including Marlowe's *Faustus*, Shakespeare's *Tempest* and *Romeo and Juliet*, Sophocles' *Antigonè*, Congreve's *The Way of the World*, plus the anonymous *Everyman*, and adding to that formidable garrison two modern texts (Ionesco's *Rhinoceros* and Niel Simon's *The Prisoner of 2nd Avenue*), El-Solh composed 11 scenes combining movement with mime and modern dance. Few of those, however, despite their weighty sources, had imaginative power or real dramatic impact. After an impressive and highly evocative opening, the show seemed to lose its metaphoric power until scene five (the Berserk Storm) which again revived our hopes only to have them dashed in the three scenes that followed. It was not until scenes nine and ten that El-Solh's creative powers came into their own to give us a real taste of the poetry of movement. It is possible that El-Solh's attachment to her sources crippled her imagination a bit and curbed her style; she was at her best when the movement broke loose from the hold of the mother-text and did not attempt to mime definite scenes and episodes. It is possible, too, that she was slightly hampered by the relative in-

* 24.11.1994. In English.

experience of her lithe and blithe young cast of AUC students. But by and large, and despite the shortcomings, the show was both truly experimental and reasonably enjoyable. Paul Rinaldi's bold, abstract set, Akram Khadr's lighting and Larry P. Catlin's mustic contributed not a little to the enjoyment.

Brief Candles

Hedda Gabler at the AUC*

I never thought I would take it so hard. We had only met a few times at the Wallace theatre and some receptions, and twice for lunch to discuss theatre matters. Funny how he could inspire so much affection on such slight acquaintance. After a few encounters, his gentleness, genuine warmth and natural courtesy made you feel as if you had known him for years. His passion for theatre and intense love of actors touched a responsive chord in my heart and I found his keen interest in the Egyptian theatre and his curiosity about its mode of operation quite gratifying. Over the past ten years, through the AUC theatre company, his brainchild, he explored a wide range of plays and enriched the theatrical life of Cairo with a series of good productions from the storehouse of world drama; for the next stage he foresaw more Egyptian drama being performed by the company and a wider and more varied audience for its productions. He also talked of exploring ways of cooperation between the Department of Performing and Visual Arts he founded at the AUC in 1985, and chaired until his death, and the Egyptian Academy of Arts and state theatre establishment. His fervent enthusiasm for his outstanding Egyptian students and interest in their promotion (Mahmoud El-Lozy being a case in point) was part of this project.

The last time we met, he looked paler and thinner and complained of a bad hip — no more. Outside his favourite restaurant in downtown Cairo, we shook hands and promised to get together after the summer

* 30.11.1995. In English.

holiday and he limped away. Once or twice during CIFET last September, I glimpsed him among the crowd, across a sea of heads, and made a mental note that I should call him, at least to return a video recording of his production of Chekov's *Three Sisters* which he had lent me to watch. I never got round to it; then last Thursday, at the opening of the Women's Book Fair at Al-Hanager, I ran into his colleague, Ferial Ghazoul, and immediately asked: "How is Walter? I heard he hasn't been well." Taken aback, she blurted out, "he's dead. Didn't you know? He died two weeks ago."

So Walter is dead. The wonderful Walter Eysselinck is dead. What irony! I had planned to watch his *Hedda Gabler* at the Wallace the same evening and had hoped to see him after the show. But though physically absent, his presence could be felt everywhere: in the theatre which, over the years, had witnessed his AUC productions — *Summer and Smoke, The Good Person of Setzuan, A Flea in Her Ear, Oliver, The Three Sisters, Death of A Salesman* and *The Good Doctor*, among others; in the production of *Hedda Gabler* he conceived and cast and did not live to finish; and in the brave and moving efforts of the staff of his department who undertook to complete the job he started and dedicated the production to his memory.

In the printed programme of the show, Cynthia Nelson, the dean of the School of Humanities and Social Sciences of the AUC writes: "Before leaving for Belgium (his mother country where he died on 28th October), Walter remarked to me how deeply moved and fiercely proud he was of his entire staff for 'stepping in to the breach and taking hold'." Had he lived to see the result, he would have been even more proud.

In Egypt, Ibsen, though widely known and read and regularly studied at the Theatre Institute and some language university departments, is, curiously, never performed on stage. Translations of his plays have been available for the past twenty-five years at least, but in all my years as theatre critic (and they have been many) and before, I do not remember seeing a single production of any of them. I wonder if Eysselinck had this in mind when he embarked on his *Gabler* project. He was pleased when I mentioned once that his choice of texts, even though they were performed in English, supplied a real need for the Egyptian theatre-goer who rarely gets the chance of watching the classics of world drama in performance. In this sad situation, even a modest production of an Ibsen play would be welcome. But Eysselinck's *Hedda Gabler* as it turned out, despite his absence, was far from a modest show.

After Eysselinck's departure, the responsibility of directing the play devolved on the shoulders of Mahmoud El-Lozy, his student and close associate for years, and he gave us a clean, elegant and polished production, with no frills or rough edges. Abdallah El-Ayouty's set, in its general design and details, followed closely Ibsen's description of the setting in his stage directions. This was wise in a production which did not presume to go against the text or give a deconstructive reading or some startling new interpretation of it. Indeed, a different set which ignored the symbolic value Ibsen usually invested in the visual details of his settings would have robbed the production of much of its power. The director's policy seems to have been: if it is good, leave it alone. Nahed Nasrallah's costumes were executed in the same spirit, evoking the period and blending well in colour and texture with the set.

But though directing in a deliberately conservative style, El-Lozy managed, quite refreshingly, to break the traditional, grim, reverential attitude towards Ibsen which has long bedevilled his plays and often results in deadly boring and oppressively sombre productions. The actors put more of an accent on the humorous and ridiculous aspects of their characters, with Eric Grischkat, as Tesman, openly steering his performance in the direction of comic caricature and playing some of his lines for laughs. In the hands of Noha Farouk, the purity, innocence and heedless passion of Mrs. Elvsted acquired definite shades of silliness and stupidity which at times provoked laughter. Even Krista Scott, as the tragically entrapped Hedda, played down the *angiosse*, delivering many of her lines in a tone of dry sarcasm reminiscent of the bored, elegant ladies of the Restoration comedy of manners who could not abide stupidity or vulgarity.

The crust of sarcasm and dry humour would break sometimes, however, to give us a glimpse of Hedda's despair, her excrutiating contempt for her cowardice and her growing self-loathing which will eventually lead her to self destruction. Her Hedda was neither loveable nor pathetic; she was alternately petulant, spoilt, vicious, mean, cruel, vain and malicious — but always ferociously hungry for something she could not even describe and could only express with the word 'FREE'. But if Scott's Gabler was not larger than life, she was definitely larger than the marionette-like characters who surrounded her, and much more real. The only exception was Judge Brack who, unlike the others, did not seem like a character out of a strip cartoon. El-Lozy performed the part with bland realism and occasional hints of menace to make credible the fact that it is this character who finally pushes Hedda over the edge.

It is a credit to the director and his performers and crew that deeply shocked and shaken as I felt that evening, I could still enjoy the production and share in the audience's laughter. It was the best tribute to Walter — a man for whom theatre was synonymous with joy and who believed it could defeat even death.

Love's Letter Lost

An adaptation of Ion Luca Caragiale's *The Lost Letter* at the National Theatre*

With the first half of Ramadan behind us, the lights are beginning to go up again in some theatres. The National has led the way with a resumption of *Hikmat Hanim Almaz*, a lively musical comedy loosely based on the Romanian Ion Luca Caragiale's *The Lost Letter* (*O scrisoare pierduta*, 1884). The play, in a translation by Edward Kharrat, had received its Egyptian premiere in 1956, in a production directed by Hamdi Ghayth at the same venue. For the current revival (which opened last December and ran for two weeks before it temporarily closed down on account of the quasi-mandatory one-week theatres' holiday at the beginning of Ramadan), Hoda Wasfi, the head of the National, chose a promising young director as part of her policy to renew the blood of this old, venerable establishment. Her decision, perhaps not unpredictably, incensed the old guard of veteran directors and provoked a lot of hostility regardless of the merits of the show. At the public meeting between the minister of culture and theatre people, held at the Balloon Theatre on the eve of Ramadan — a meeting which soon disintegrated into a slanging match and witnessed many an unfortunate incident, including two directors literally coming to blows — director Hamdi Ghayth launched a virulent tirade against Wasfi's policy in running the National, accusing her of having turned the theatre into a playground for 'kids'. He was clearly referring to Mohamed

* 30.1.1997. In Arabic.

Omar, the director of the current production of *The Lost Letter*, who, in his early thirties, hardly qualifies as a 'kid'. Either Ghayth, at over 70, is beginning to suffer a failure of memory, or, goaded by a bitter resentment of the younger generation, has conventiently chosen to forget how he and his generation, in the sixties, were given leading positions in the theatre when they were, by his present criterion, still 'toddlers'; that is, in their late twenties.

The antagonism occasioned by Wasfi's choice of director was exacerbated by the stuffy, conventional attitude as to what is 'proper' for the National to show. Comedy, and especially musical comedy, is traditionally tacitly regarded as unworthy of the National, unless, of course, it is Shakespeare's or Moliere's. Romanian drama is practically unknown in Egypt and, for many, Caragiale, who is described in most world drama encyclopaedias as Romania's most important dramatist and the founder of its comic theatre, is a virtual nonentity. Critics, who after the controversial musical version of Ahmed Shawqi's verse comedy, *Al-Sitt Huda*, ebulliently directed by Samir Al-Asfouri, had been expecting something solid and familiar, like *Hamlet* or *The Merchant of Venice* (two advertised projects that ran into obstacles and had to be postponed or temporarily abandoned), felt slightly betrayed and were baffled and confounded by the choice of play, forgetting it was in the National's repertoire; others found the musical adaptation by Mohamed Bahgat, a young poet who in Ghayth's book would figure as another 'kid', too rowdy, funny, and cynically hilarious to suit the dignity of the National. Wasfi was accused of going commercial, especially since she contracted TV star, Sumayyah Al-Alfi, to play the leading, eponymous role of lady *Almaz*.

I had heard such negative, off-putting reports of the show that I nearly did not go to see it. When I did go, it was with cold feet, expecting the worst. Possibly this made me more tolerant about it than I might otherwise have been; but, on the whole, the evening passed pleasantly enough with occasional bouts of side-splitting laughter. The adaptation set the play in Egypt, during the monarchy, and came up with suitable equivalents for the names of the original characters and their social positions. Despite some alterations and additions, it stuck closely to the basic plot of the original text and tried to preserve its sharp, satirical edge and witty dialogue. Osama Abbas, a brilliant and subtle comedian, undertook the part of Stepan Tipatescu who, during an election campaign, discovers that a love letter he had written to his mistress, Zöe Trahanache (competently and elegantly played by Sumayyah Al-Alfi), had fallen into the hands of his rival and political opponent Catavencu who threatens to publish it and cause a scandal (the lady is married to Tipatescu's best friend) unless the couple help him win the election.

While the feverish efforts of the couple to recover the letter and bargain with Catavencu engage the centre of the plot and propel the action along with enough suspense to sustain the interest of the audience, the surface is embroidered with farcical incidents, satirical lyrics and hilarious political parody. At times, however, the embroidery grew so thick that it nearly obstructed our view of the central action. Indeed, with such comedians as Ahmed Aql in the role of Zöe's cuckolded husband, Sami Maghawri as the lovable villain Catavencu, Ahdi Sadiq as Tipatescu's bungling and boastful right-hand man, not to mention the excellent contingent of less famous comedians — Fathi Sa'd, Ibrahim Gamal, Mohamed Khalil, Ayman Abdel-Rahman, among

others — who doubled in many of the minor parts, and the irrepressible Rida Idris as the town drunk who finally finds the letter, the play seemed to have such an overabundance of comic talent that at moments it threatened to burst at the seams. In the electioneering episode, for instance, in Act Two, the actors got into such a heated competition for laughs that the scene lost all form and rhythm and slid into chaos; as they frenziedly fought to drown out and upstage one another, adlibbing *ad infinitum*, the absence of a firm directorial hand was regrettably only too obvious.

But the thing that truly marred the production was the decor. Salah Hafez's sets lacked not only flair and imagination, but good taste as well. They bulked large and sported the weirdest array of colours imaginable without having any dramatic significance. Na'ima Agami's elegant period costumes could not hope to make an impression in such a vulgar visual context and looked completely out of place. I kept trying to convince myself that it was all intentional — that the lurid garishness was meant as a sign of the intrinsic vulgarity and moral corruption of the *haut monde* the play portrays — but it was no use. Whenever the lights dimmed on-stage, except for a few spot lights on the actors, I experienced immense relief. Unfortunately, this did not happen very often. With different sets and more discipline where the acotrs are concerned, *Hikmat Hanim Almaz* could prove a genuine diamond – even though its heroine is a fake.

Poles Apart

The Polis Titkacy theatre actors leap from Camus's Caligula to a potpourri of oriental theatrical forms at Al-Salam theatre*

Before the 1990s Polish theatre was virtually unknown in Egypt. Few had heard of Grotowski or read his classic, *Towards a Poor Theatre* (though it was translated into Arabic by Samir Sarhan in 1968 and included in his book *New Experiments in Theatre*), and fewer still knew anything about Kantor, Wajda or Szajna. No one seems to recall ever seeing, or having even heard of a Polish show in Egypt before 1991 when the Cairo International Festival for Experimental Theatre (CIFET), in its third session, hosted the Scena Plastycana company of the Catholic University of Lublin, with its stunning and, for Egyptian audiences, thoroughly disorienting *Humidity* (or *Moisture*), devised and directed by Leszek Madzik.

The show, which unfolded as a series of dimly lit, creepy images floating across what looked like a huge dark void and evoking a hopelessly dehumanised world, more like a graveyard, infested with death and decay, gave fresh fuel to the already ongoing controversy over what constituted, or could be rated as theatre. It had started in 1988, during the first CIFET, and gained momentum the following year when two modern dance pieces — Bulgaria's *Don Juan* and Eva-Maria Lerchenberg-Thony's West German *Geschlossional Gesellshaft* (based on Sartre's *Huis Clos*) — carried the awards for best performance and

* 30.11.2000. In Polish and Arabic.

best director respectively. The traditionalists had argued that dance theatre did not rank as proper theatre since it banished the word; they had not bargained for *Humidity*, which banished not only the word but the human performer altogether. Completely out of their depth, they dismissed it, for the sake of convenience, as belonging more to the realm of kinetic art. Nevertheless, they could not ignore the overwhelming impact the show had on Egyptian audiences, the refreshing sense of liberation it inspired in young Egyptian artists, or the critical drive to rethink the concept of theatre it created.

The arrival of Josef Szajna in 1992, as one of the festival's honorees and to take part in the central seminar on theory and practice in experimental theatre, together with a series of video-lectures on the work of Grotowski, Szajna and Kantor given by Krzysztof Domagalik, one of Grotowski's students, at the Cinema Institute during the festival, bolstered the new critical interest in Polish theatre and enhanced its growing popularity. From that time on, guest shows from Poland have become notorious for generating frantic excitement, inordinate expectations and unfailingly causing furious rioting at the venues where they play. Indeed, for many of the festival regulars, the prospect of watching a Polish show, however delightful, has increasingly become shadowed by a sense of dread and trepidation. There is always the inevitable long wait outside the doors, in closely packed lobbies, the suffocating stink of humid heat and sweat, the growing panic as rumour spreads that only a limited number will be admitted, or that all the seats have already been taken by VIPs smuggled through the stage door and, finally, the awful rush and crush as the restless crowd heave forward, like a mighty tidal wave, at the sight of the first crack in the doors.

Usually, twice as many as the number allowed by the director manage to get in, but invariably many are left outside, and it is not uncommon to hear them shouting and cursing everything and everybody — the festival, the theatre, the Poles, the security and the audience who got in. Some would even unreasonably demand, screaming at the top of their voices, that any show, Polish or otherwise, that insists on a small, intimate space should be banned from the festival.

When I was invited to watch two visiting productions by the St. I. Witkiewicz Theatre (popularly called Witkacy Theatre) two weeks ago, I was overjoyed; I had already seen and admired their *For You the Way*, and *Fin* at the festival in 1997 and '98 successively. But instead of saying how delightful, or anything to that effect, I found myself impulsively asking: Where? Al-Salam, I was informed. Which hall? I hastened to ask; the main hall, I was assured. At once my sudden anxiety, of which I had not been conscious, drained away. Thank God it was autumn and not festival time. One could go early, I thought, leisurely sip coffee in the foyer, then saunter into the large, well-raked auditorium, pick a good seat, preferably in the first row after the aisle which marks the end of the top-priced seats (it gives the best view of the stage), sit down, relax, take in the stage design if one can and put oneself in a receptive mood.

Of course, with the benefit of two Vitkacy shows behind me, I should have known better. At the entrance of the theatre, and before I had one foot into the foyer, I was firmly and somewhat ominously guided in the direction of the stage door. My guide whispered it was better to go in now since seats were limited. "Are we going to sit on the stage again?" I bleated hopelessly; his yes was all too predictable. I

went past the back-stage visitors room, then plunged into darkness, feeling my way gingerly and stumbling over a couple of steps.

When I finally emerged, I found myself inside a huge tent which must have taken up the whole of the stage and most of the back-stage area. It was all black and draped all round with old, charred and tattered curtains, also black, though faded to a dusty tone. It was dimly lit, suggesting a ghostly atmosphere. Looking around for a moment to get my bearings, I found myself wondering about the secret of the Poles' obsession with black and dim lighting, and whether it was the effect of the country's cliamte, history, religion, national temperament or collective worldview. I remembered bringing up the issue with Domagalik back in 1992 and how he had stridently denied any such obsession; I quickly reviewed all the Polish shows I had seen since, and found that with the exception of two — the Centre of Theatrical Practices' *Carmina Burana* in 1996 (directed by Wkodzimierz Staniewski), and the Theatre-Cinema's *Dong* (devised and directed by Zbigniew Szumski), which opened this year's experimental festival last September — all corroborated my and many other Egyptian viewers' impression.

Grey was also very much in evidence — in the round, soft, feather mattress in the middle of the tent which constituted the whole of the performance space (quite a challenge that), in the matching silver-grey hard disc hanging over it (Caligula's much ranted about and passionately coveted moon, made visible), and in the long, grey cloaks the audience were made to wear at the door before stepping in. All round the tent, on rows of tiered benches, ending with grey cushions at floor level, the audience sat, like the anonymous Roman citizens at the

old sports tournaments, wrestling matches or circus shows, forming a circular mass of grey enclosing the smaller grey circle in the middle. Four aisles connected the performance space with four doors in the wall of the tent, drawing, by dint of their positions, an imaginary, horizontal cross over the whole tent, with the point of intersection right at the centre of the inner circle. Though invisible, this cross seemed to dominate the whole space, constituting the focus of the total scenographic composition and the gravitational force orchestrating the actors' movement.

The characters could only enter and exit along the pattern of the cross, and the only place they could meet to work out the drama was round its centre, on the small, grey and empty circle, representing human existence. I tried hard to find if something in the design suggested another imaginary cross — a vertical one — that could connect the disc above and the circle below, or man and God and heaven and earth. Needless to say, I found none: neither Camus's play about the Roman emperor driven to mad destructiveness and nihilistic rage by his confrontation with death and the absurdity of human existence, nor the frequently noted persistent preoccupation of the Witkiewicz Theatre and its artistic director, Andrzej Dziul, with the theme of metaphysical hunger (dominant in the work of the Polish dramatist to whom the theatre is dedicated and named), and the confronation between an individual, longing for transcendental absolutes and god-like powers and a flat, anthropocentric world, devoid of all metaphysics, could allow for such a vertical cross to exist.

The world of the globe-like tent pitched on the stage of Al-Salam theatre was alternately violent, savagely cruel, grotesque and ridiculous.

But it was not without moments of real pain and tragic loneliness. It was Caligula's world and also ours. For the space of two hours we were made a vital and active part of this world, and this was achieved not only by the many cross-references to our times (through the costumes, sections of Tomasz Stanko's score, and the presentation of Caligula's transvestite antics and his masquerading as Venus in the form of a cabaret number and striptease act), but also by resorting to familiar meta-theatrical devices, such as lighting up the audience at certain points, making them the object of the actors' gaze and of each other's, addressing them directly, or persuading some of them to step forward and participate as actors in minor roles, as in the poetry contest scene.

Dziuk's original staging of Camus's text, his use of his theatre space as poetic metaphor, his stunning control of mood and atmosphere, and his clever management of movement and props to create mock-religious effects (as in the case of Caligula's bath-tub which suggests a mock-baptism, or the round table in the banquet scene which parodies the disc overhead, hinting at a mock-last-supper, or Caesonia's net-like trailing drapes, worn over a flimsy, pale, shiny dress, making her look like a trapped fish and ironically casting Caligula in the role of the Fisher King who saves souls by fishing them out of sin) — these and many other inspired images and memorable details invested the play's essentially traditional form and familiar dialogue with new vitality, making it come across as a thrilling, totally engrossing experience. The actors, as in most of the Polish shows that have visited Egypt, were simply marvellous, combining passionate abandon and austere discipline, touching spontaneity and technical

sophistication, deeply human one moment and bestial, subhuman or thoroughly diabolical the next.

The same actors treated us the following evening to a completely different style of theatre, delighting us with further proofs of their versatility and masterful command of theatrical language.

The show, *Sanduq Al-Dunya* (Chest of Miracles), was a bit of an oddity this time: a collage of many kinds of oriental theatrical traditions, plus extracts from two modern poetic dramas on religious themes (Salah Abdel-Sabour's *Murder in Baghdad* and Abdel-Rahman El-Sharqawi's *Al-Hussein as Rebel*), performed in Polish by actors completely alien to those traditions. This curious and daring venture was the brainchild of director Hanaa Abdel-Fattah and was prompted, as he confesses in his programme note, by the attempt to "find values which are common for both Arab and Polish theatre," and to rediscover one's own culture and revise one's "subjective attitude" to it by projecting it in a different context and viewing it through the eyes of the other. There was also the curiosity as to what the other would make of it.

It was not surprising — indeed, it was rather inevitable — that Abdel-Fattah should undertake such a project and engage in an intimate cultural and artistic dialogue with Polish artists of kindred interests. He spent close on 20 years in Poland studying theatre and working as an actor and director with various companies; back in Egypt, he and his Polish wife worked hard and ceaselessly, inside and outside the experimental festival, to introduce and popularise the Polish theatre in Egypt. Indeed, no one has done as much as this couple to promote cultural dialogue between Egyptian and Polish artists and provide the

necessary groundwork and knowledge it badly needed. Domagalik's valuable video-lectures would have been impossible if Abdel-Fattah was not at hand to address the relevant bodies and make the necessary arrangements, provide simultaneous interpretation and volunteer many helpful footnotes and illuminating comments. Besides his many translations of Polish books and plays, he has written extensively on the major figures in Polish theatre. If you ask him why he does it, or why so passionately, he will tell you that for him cultural dialogue is an existential need, a fact of life and a daily experience. It happens every moment with his family and is bound to continue for the rest of their lives.

But what did the Polish actors make of those bits and pieces — of the shadow play about the cheating matchmaker, the tale from the *Arabian Nights* about the pot-seller whose daydreaming costs him his small capital, the scene from the Iranian traditional Ta'ziyeh (a cycle of ritual, religious dramas of condolences, or passion plays, featuring the events leading to the murder of Al-Hussein, the prophet's grandson), the female fertility or male Sufi dances, or the excerpts from the modern texts?

"The actors of Vitkacy Theatre," Abdel-Fattah writes, "were very eager to get to know another culture, to discover its symbols, signs and, above all, the overriding values." And in the process of doing this, they tried, with the director's help, to make themselves temporarily at home in this culture by assimilating what they could of it, reproducing it in slightly altered, artistically and culturally modified forms that reflected both cultures without belonging exclusively to either. And this is exactly what is interesting and moving in this show for an Egyptian

audience. They find it at once intriguingly familiar and palpably foreign; and impressed by the actors' sincere efforts and art, they enter into the spirit of the game (of cultural dialogue) and do their best to support the actors and make it a success. They do so by word and gesture, lots of delighted laughter and enthusiastic applause. The pronunciation of Arabic words by the actors always occasions a lot of hilarity, but the laughter also communicates a grateful, supportive recognition of the effort to cross barriers and come closer.

At the end of the show the actors and audience seemed like old friends and the tent which enclosed them, together with the large black chest which contained all the actor's props and costumes, and the colourful make-shift stage-cum-shadow-theatre booth they had erected, became an expansive, shared, communal space, embracing and celebrating difference as a basic asset to human existence and one of its great joys and the starting point for real human communication.

Butterflies and Paper Canoes

A Eugenio Barba-Julia Varley workshop at the AUC*

For five days last month, from 18-22 February, the Wallace Theatre became a destination for many theatre artists and lovers. Every afternoon they dropped everything, rushed through the crazy Cairo traffic and presented themselves with rare punctuality at the door of the theatre at 4 pm. The occasion was a series of workshops and demonstrations, ending with a performance, presented by Eugenio Barba, the founder of the Odin theatre in Denmark and the International School of Theatre Anthropology (ISTA) and a major influence in contemporary theatre, with author, actress and director Julia Varley, an active force at Odin Theatre since she joined it in 1976. The event, planned and organised by AUC's Performing Arts Department, was primarily intended for the benefit of students and faculty — an attempt, perhaps, to dislodge the long-standing tradition of realistic acting adopted by that department over many years and introduce fresh modes and influences. The Cairo theatre community, however, was not excluded and any one who showed interest was generously invited to take part for free.

Of those who came few had heard of Barba or read any of his works and could not be expected to grasp his complex, many-faceted thinking on theatre or the intricacies of his multi-layered training and working methods in such a short time. And even those who knew

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* 4.3.2001.

something about him — either through the Arabic translation of James Roose-Evans' book *Experimental Theatre from Stanislavsky to Peter Brook*, which contains a chapter on him, or Ian Watson's *Towards a Third Theatre: Eugenio Barba and the Odin Teatret*, which appeared among the publications of CIFET last September — found some of his ideas somewhat esoteric, teasingly paradoxical and even bizarre. And yet for many, these five long and intensive afternoon sessions, held in the cloistered dimness of the Wallace while the world whirled madly by outside, in Tahrir Square, provided an unforgettable experience, at once challenging, humbling and liberating.

Describing how he felt about our meeting place in his farewell speech on the last day, Barba compared it to one of those old catacombs in which the first Egyptian Christians retired to escape their persecutors and meet secretly with other disciples.

And true, the few Egyptian artists who regularly attended were all rebels, renegades in search of a new path, a new horizon. They came from the fringe, from the marginalised independent groups that started mushrooming in Egypt in the mid-80s and have since been fighting for survival, against great odds, protecting their identity as an alternative to either the commercial of the subsidised mainstream theatre — what Barba would call a "third theatre" (though in his case the term would refer to an alternative to traditional and experimental theatre). Barba has described such artists as small, floating islands or little paper canoes, floating from shore to shore across dangerous waters.

The sense of community — even of conspiracy — which Barba vividly felt and expressed in his metaphor of the catacomb was shared by our independent artists and translated into a bond of solidarity which

transcended technical choices and artistic considerations. Not that these were ignored: indeed, they were given great and meticulous attention by both Barba and Varley. But the truly inspiring and often deeply moving aspect of their performance, both in the workshops and demonstrations, was the way technical procedures and aesthetic questions were constantly related to a deeper level of existence, to personal needs and wounds, ethical choices, questions of identity and cultural transcendence, to the dignity, wholeness and integrity of the human body as a creative and spiritual force. In this context, the rigorous discipline, arduous training, complete dedication and ascetic living which Barba demands from his artists become a means of achieving the essence of theatre, not as performance or just an artistic form, but as a form of being and reacting — as a way, as he puts it in his fascinating book *Theatre, Solitude, Craft, Revolt*, "of being present ... and seeking more human relationships with the purpose of creating a social cell in which intentions, aspirations and social needs begin to be transformed into actions."

Theatre as a form of being and reacting regardless of styles or expressive tendencies is a key concept in Barba's definition of what he calls Third Theatre, and it is a concept that many independent theatre groups in Egypt and all over the world would readily embrace and identify with. Most of them would also agree with him that they "do not dream of themselves as being vehicles for great words, great messages, or great debates, but seek a way to bring the individual into contact with the individual, the different with the different."

Like Barba, who became disenchanted with Marxism during his three year apprenticeship with Grotowski in Poland in the early sixties and lost his faith in the power of political theatre to change the world,

many of our your independent theatre groups believe that the real social value of theatre can most effectively be traced in the new relationships, forged through the producing of performances, between spectator and actor, which can sometimes be subversive and disruptive at a deeper level than language. Out of this faith in relationships as the fertile soil for theatrical vitality, ISTA was born — a neutral open space where the great masters from the east and west can compare their experiences and try to discover shared principles which underlie all performance, regardless of geography or culture, at the pre-expressive level, and constitute the secret art of the performer everywhere. The fruits of this research are recorded in *A Dictionary of Theatre Anthropology* composed by Barba and Nicola Savarese, and in explaining some of them to his audience at the Wallace, Barba used Varley to illustrate them.

Barba's four directing workshops were so condensed, so crammed full of ideas, stories, names, personal recollections and technical and historical information that it was sometimes difficult to digest all one was offered. Barba, however, managed to make everything he said or did come across as quite interesting and even entertaining. Small and dark, with soft, silvery hair and always in sandals and a short, sleeveless vest over a shirt, he seemed completely at ease, like a man leisurely moving around his own living room. He talked informally, adopting an intimate conversational tone as if confiding personal memories to a friend. His presence was riveting even when one's mind wandered and lost track of what he was saying. Without a trace of pretentiousness or pomposity, he presented a rare image combining the candid and fresh simplicity of a child and the wisdom and profundity of an ancient sage.

But Barba's workshops and the ideas and theories he propounded would have had a lesser impact without Julia Valrey's valuable demonstrations. Her first, entitled *The Echo of Silence*, was devoted to vocal training and the creative management of the actor's voice to interpret the text and enrich it with new rhythms, echoes and associations, and the second, *The Dead Brother*, concentrated on the creative use of the imagination in physical improvisations to compose movement scores, create a vital stage presence and make perceptible the multiple meanings embedded in a text, what its words try to conceal or leave unsaid. These demonstrations made Barba's theories come alive, giving them substance, a pulsating dynamic presence, force and, most crucially, credibility. Alone, on a bare stage, without sets, lighting, costumes or props, except for one chair, Varley managed to enthrall her audience mentally and sensorially, command their deep respect and even inspire them with a sense of awe. She was the embodiment of the creative performer, of the disciplined, dedicated, hardworking artist, in full command of her instruments, material and techniques; she was also a concrete, living and irrefutable validation of Barba's insights and the road travelled by the Odin Teatret for over 35 years.

But the highest point of Varley's contribution in those five days was her performance, on the last day, in *Dona Musica's Butterflies*, an Odin Teatret production for which she also wrote the text and designed the scenography. It is a strange and haunting text which uses theatre as setting, material and starting point, and the dialectical relationship between theatrical character, actress, author and director as a vehicle to explore the meaning of identity, reality and theatre, in the end revealing their fragility, vulnerability, uncertainty and transience. Varley revives a character, Dona Musica, she had acted in a previous performance,

Kaosmos, and sets her on the stage to talk and tell her story. But what Dona Musica presents us with is a curious montage of what seem at first wildly incongruous elements. Fragments of real stories merge with others from poems, fictional tales and mystical insights and are interspersed with scientific accounts of the life-cycle of the butterfly and the theories of modern physics about the nature of matter, reality and atomic events. But, as in all highly poetical or mystical compositions, through the seeming chaos one can glimpse a unifying force, best described as a surge, a flow.

Early in the play Dona Musica mentions that her name in *Kaosmos* was inspired by another character in Paul Claudel's *Le Soulier de Satin*, then remembers that he had made his Dona Musica say: "When words can only be used for dispute, why then not be aware that through chaos there is a sea of darkness at our disposal?"

She later describes what the real actress, Julia Varley, had tried to achieve in her representation of her on stage in terms that vividly evoke the sea: "Infinity, to be and not be, flowing and changing, the shadow, what cannot be known and understood, the dance and the dancer who are one and the same ... alteration, motion without rest, rising and sinking without a fixed law; it is only change that is at work here; it is like water in its movement."

Another unifying force is the image of the butterfly which weaves in and out of the text and visually dominates the performance. Like the sea, it is never fixed, constantly changing, and though fragile, it has survived longer than dinasaurs. Soon, the image of the white butterfly darting among carnations links up with the image of the paper canoe (which Barba used as a title for one of his books) and we are back in a

circle to the sea. All are metaphors for life and in the performance Varley adds others, like the candle burning inside a small coffin-like box and the garden shaped like a circle, bordered with flowers and finally invaded by death in the shape of a dancing figure with a skull for a head, holding a flower in his grinning mouth and sporting on his chest a blue butterfly, pierced and framed.

Why a blue butterfly?

"Because it is precious," Julia explains. "It only lives one day." The final image is of death sitting on Dona Musica's chair, beside her small round table, and wearing her long white wig, while the actress, Julia, having removed her makeup and wig, quietly withdraws. It was funny, horribly grotesque and infinitely sad.

This performance, the first by the Odin Teatret in Egypt and the Arab world, brought together all the threads we had been following in the workshops and demonstrations of the previous days, weaving them into a vivid, coherent image which not only bodied forth the methods, techniques and aesthetic values of that rare group of artists, but also revealed their existential preoccupations, the philosophical influences on their work, and the rich and diverse cultural sources on which they draw. It was a grand finale for a marvellous week.

In Search of Healing

A Polish Carmen and the Odin theatre's The Castle of Holstebro*

For days after 11 September I moved around like a finely-programmed android. I acted the same as usual, doing and saying what was expected of me and efficiently coping with new, distressing tasks — like trying to help and console the two anguished American guests of CIFET, stranded at the Cairo Sheraton and feeling trapped, or tracking down my brother who works at the UN in New York and whose silence for two whole days after the appalling disaster of the WTC made my ailing mother hysterical with worry. There were also some friends in New York I needed to make sure were still alive. I went about everything quietly, methodically, but soullessly, like a well-geared machine. It was as if one's imagination which had been long straining under the weight of so much senseless, unnecessary suffering, so much insane violence and bloodshed had suddenly snapped. I felt nothing, like someone drained of all life and hurled into a silent, lonely void. But the void was infested with horrible images; they kept welling up from somewhere inside my head and wouldn't go away however many pills I swallowed – multilated bodies, weeping children, piles of corpses in mass-graves, crumbling towers, wailing women rummaging through the rubble and debris of what were once their homes and babies with the wrinkled faces of old men and bellies like little inflated balloons.

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* 4.10.2001. In Polish and English.

It was as if the 11-September American nightmare had pressed a secret button in my brain, releasing all the images of horror I had stored up over half a century on this planet and merging them, regardless of the where and when, into one infernal vision. Be it Palestine or Vietnam, Iraq, Bosnia or Afghanistan, New York, Algeria, West Jerusalem or Southern Sudan, the suffering and the horror were the same. It seemed to me that ever since the moment I could grasp the meaning of things, the world has been nothing but an ever-widening vicious circle, always drawing in more corpses, more pain and hatred and more blood. And though the leaders of this macabre merry-go-round keep changing their masks (from ruthless totalitarian regimes, rabid military autocrats and greedy foreign invaders to self-righteous, bigoted ideologues, sanctimonious charlatans and fanatical spiritual leaders), their victims are always the same: the young and innocent, the weak and helpless, the poor and ignorant, as well as the tolerant, rational and fair-minded.

During those days (how many were they? I don't remember), I could not go anywhere near a theatre, even flinched from the mere idea. The world had suddenly become a stage presenting a monstrous revenge tragedy of unprecedented enormity, swiftness and magnitude, and with more corpses than all the plays in the world put together. Others would follow, very soon, we were promised by the media, and would, no doubt, be performed with the same grim determination, meticulous attention to timing and cold-blooded efficiency. "Blood will have blood," I remembered Macbeth saying; but in this ultra-modern, hi-tech revenge play, the ethical underpinnings were far more tangled, ambivalent and teasing than in the most complex Shakespearean tragedy. To unravel them, to trace the roots of evil, one would have to

go back hundreds of years and subject the history of many civilizations to a grueling moral inquiry. But that was a job for a culture historian, I thought, not a drama critic. Was I even that?... a drama critic? I wondered. More to the point, what good was a drama critic in this demented topsy-turvy world?

Now as I begin to recover from my mental inertia and robot-like existence, I find myself trying to hang on to my faith in the value of theatre. But what is exactly this value? I ask myself. And, curiously, as I think about it, I begin to see 'the good of a drama critic'; it lies in just posing this question in moments of crisis, in rethinking and, perhaps, reaffirming the value of theatre when reality threatens to overrun it and usurp its place.

As for the 'good of theatre', it depends on what each of us means when we use the word and what we expect from it. Theatre is many kinds, and functions in different ways, on various levels. Its value, therefore, is always relative, that is, relevant to each person's immediate context and urgent needs. For myself, I have never been able to formulate this value conceptually or phrase it intelligibly; for one thing, it keeps changing; for another, my awareness of it is largely intuitive. When pressed to put it in words, I invariably find myself waxing lyrical, saying silly, abstruse things like 'concrete thinking', 'the ephemerality of life made manifest', or, better still, 'an intense awareness of being in the present underlined with an acute sense of absence and transience.' You wouldn't catch me doing that now however, not after my visit to Iran last year, after a whole year of the *Intifada*, and certainly not after the 11-September terror — a prime, example of what 'concrete thinking' can do if it runs in an evil vein.

Now, more than ever, I have come to believe that the only way one can communicate one's own sense of the value of theatre is to point out a performance that, at the moment, happens to embody that value for one. And this is exactly what I did when I was grappling with this issue and fighting to regain my belief in theatre: I asked myself which of the 20 odd performances I watched in CIFET I would want to keep with me and often revisit? I tried not to think; I just closed my eyes and watched the images that flowed in. I saw an actor on stilts, wearing a skull head, a voluminous black cloak and stalking menacingly in the Opera grounds, behind the open air theatre, waving a huge black flag over the heads of the audience who gathered round on three sides, as well as the heads of the four or five actors on the ground. They looked pathetically small compared to him, and rushed around in terror. The same harassed actors were repeatedly chased around with whips by two hooded actors, also on stilts, in sleeveless leather vests, fastened to their bare chests with a strap at the back; they were made to stand in a line, take off their clothes and march helplessly through a forbidding black metal gate, flanked by two gruesome towers, which closed ominously behind them. What lay behind that sinister gate was anyone's guess: hell? The trenches? A mass-grave? A torture chamber? A concentration camp?

When they emerged, they were completely broken in body and mind; they carried in some charred wooden crosses, draped the shirts they had taken off on them and set them alight in a silent ritual reenacting the horrors of burning at the stake. Equally vivid was the symbolic rape scene in which a thin, pale girl was ringed by drunken soldiers, sharing the same bottle, throwing it to each other and showering their victim with jets of booze and spittle.

When the gigantic gate and towers burst into flames at the end and slowly collapsed, bit by bit, hissing and crackling in the night air, some took it as a sign of liberation, some as a clear reference to the holocaust, but everyone thought it a spectacular stunt and thrilling coup de theatre. This and the previous images belonged to the Polish *Carmen Funebre*, billed as "an exploration of the war in Bosnia and, by extension, other ethnic conflicts round the world." It won the best scenography award from the international jury, rave notices from the critics and rapturous applause from the audience; but, would I want to keep that forever? I watched *Carmen Funebre* on 9 September and found all that whip-cracking and fire-raising somewhat facile and a little too sensational for my taste. The show did nothing, I thought, except replay in a different key the recent horrors in Bosnia and elsewhere and offer them to the audience at a safe aesthetic distance which made them a source of diversion rather than horror. People needed this surely after the harrowing war experience, I argued with myself then; it was a kind of therapy, group-street-therapy in this case. Nevertheless, it somehow dismayed me to see people cheer and tingle at the sight of roaring flames and human torture. A young student of mine told me before the show he was seeing it for the second time. "It's got fire, whips, stilts, everything," he rattled excitedly, rubbing his hands in anticipation. As I listened to him, I little thought that two days later, that show which delighted him so much would seem to me like an awful prediction — a terrible apocalyptic vision.

The next flow of images belonged to 10 September and the Odin Teatret's *The Castle of Hǫlstebro*. Curiously, a human figure with a skull head was here too; but this time in black tails, gloves, a white embroidered shirt and a red silk scarf round his neck — a very elegant

gentleman indeed, with a name (Mr. Peanut) to boot, and definitely far from dead, notwithstanding the skull. He talked, sang and danced, embracing the lovely Julia Varley in his arms and nestled in her boson like a baby. But Mr. Peanut, as his biographer (Varley) tells us in the play's programme, had not always been like that. He had once walked on stilts like the skull man in the Polish *Carmen*, and looked "strong, hard, militaristic" and quite frightening; and before that, he "was a big heavy hanging skeleton carried during the first street parades in 1976, then a child's skeleton attached to a drum." When Julia took him over in 1980, he started "to wiggle his hips and be funny", and developed into a sophisticated, cynical clown with a full repertoire.

In *The Castle of Holstebro*, Eugenio Barba and Julia Varley salvage from the grave-diggers scene in *Hamlet* the freshly buried corpse of Ophelia and the skull of Yorick, king Hamlet's long-dead jester, and revive them visually on stage. They come to life through Julia's body which is transformed into an ambiguous, paradoxical entity, or rather, a living space where opposites are reconciled, a site where life and death, reality and art, male and female, the self and the other merge in a mystical union. And in this union, Julia and her Mr. Peanut, with whom she has travelled everywhere for the past 15 years, manage to elude reality without losing touch with it; they transcend it not by soaring high above it in disdain, but by sinking into its depths, far below the surface to discover its secret magic fountain. It was there, in the hidden depths, that they discovered, in Barba's words, that shipwrecks were not always "synonymous with destruction" but could mean "mutation", a miraculous metamorphosis. The mystical union of Ophelia and Yorick, Julia and Mr. Peanut, is celebrated with a special wedding march, a song from the play of reconciliation par excellence,

The Tempest: Ariel's "Full fathom five thy father lies;/ Of his bones are coral made;/ Those are pearls that were his eyes;/ Nothing of him that doth fade,/ But doth suffer a sea-change/ Into something rich and strange."

When Hamlet picks up Yorick's skull he, like the Polish Carmen in the face of death, sees nothing but a 'quintessence of dust'; but Julia Varley, Prospero-like, transforms it, with the help of Ariel and her puppet, Mr. Peanut, into a performance of great beauty and profound wisdom — something truly rich and strange, and, what's more, deeply healing.

Intersections and Transpositions:

Cross cultural currents*

In his compelling book, *Man Looking for Words* (Theater Instituut Nederland), in which he records insights gleaned over 40 years working in theatre, Dutch director and visual artist Ritsaert Ten Cate (who founded the famous Mickery theatre in a small farmhouse outside Amsterdam in 1965, then the Amsterdam School of Advanced Research in Theatre and Dance Studies, known as DasArts, in 1993, after he closed the Mickery in 1991 with a 9-day festival called Touch Time, and was honoured this year by CIFET for his 'contribution to the development of avant-garde theatre in Europe and The Netherlands') dedicates a whole chapter to theatre festivals. Beginning with the question "Festivals: who needs 'em'?" which he confesses is increasingly discussed these days in Europe by producers, funders, ministries of culture, the press (always in a deprecating vein) and even festival-makers, he embarks on a sincere investigation of the validity of the festival format, its various manifestations, its usefulness, and to whom? and traces the evolution and eventual corruption of the concept in the light of his own experience of scores of festivals attended over 33 years, beginning in 1958.

Initially, theatre festivals coincided with an era of social activity and change and responded to real needs, he notes; they "provided sanctuary for informal debate, for exchange of ideas and reactions which interested me more than the determination that one performance had won and another had lost." Over the years, however, the raison d'etre

* 19.9.2002.

for theatre festivals has perceptibly changed; the concept has been gradually commercialised, providing showcases for what is considered the best available on the international scene at any time, thus becoming "a major steering mechanism in the art market," or has been taken over by governments and manipulated for the promotion of a certain image and/or other political ends.

When asked by Ten Cate if she thought festivals were needed or necessary these days, an American student answered: "Festivals are good for travel agents who can offer package deals with the festival being part of the attraction. The tourist gests more value for his money this way." And she wasn't being flippant. But even when festivals are non-profit and designated as 'feasts for the people', or as occasions for cultural interaction and exchange, in "a move toward multiculturalism", they will only be tolerated "so long as they can be experienced as parties: safe and secure," and seem to Ten Cate "to be inspired more by pragmatic reasoning, political opportunism and the availability of funding than it is by any involvement of the heart ... when only a movement from the heart will make multicultural integration work." Ten Cate concludes in an impassioned tone that "it is this involvement of the heart, the mind and the soul which will make great festivals. When the terms of success or failure are gauged on this, rather than on intellectual or outsider's terms: this is where our future, and our new ways will be found. To come to terms with where things might go, and how we can achieve a movement rather than a monument, we must honestly ask, look, feel, discuss ... and above all listen to what goes on around us."

For the majority of Egyptian critics, a substantial proportion of the CIFET audience, and, indeed, many of the guest and local artists

participating in it, Ten Cate's recipe for 'great festivals' will seem vague, loose and embarrassingly, if not ridiculously 'romantic'; what makes 'good', let alone 'great festivals', they would counter argue, as indeed they have insistently done over the past 14 years of the CIFET's life, are ample funds to host world-famous companies and productions and equip our theatres to meet their technical needs, as well as better translation facilities, expert management and meticulous organisation. What the critics and the festival's audience have chronically craved is what Ten Cate sarcastically describes as "the soothing and satisfying security of having witnessed ... acknowledged great art." While this craving for the 'internationally acclaimed' is understandable – very few Egyptians, including critics, can afford to make the pilgrimage to the shrines of high art to see for themselves what they read about in books, specialised periodicals or the newspapers – it, as well as the contest (with the fetid, poisonous atmosphere and all the internecine feuds and bad blood it generates), have tended to make us lose sight of some coincidental fringe benefits which, though few, elusive and materially unquantifiable, have slowly accumulated over the years, behind the scenes – in cafés, hotel lobbies, restaurants and theatre foyers – giving the festival, in my view, its real value and validation.

Ten Cate describes some festivals as "blatantly superficial non-events ... jammed with cheap stuffing to puff out what had no rationalisation to begin with" and the CIFET has often been attacked by its most virulent critics in very much the same abusive terms. It hosts for too many shows; and far too many of them are dull and cliché-ridden, pompously pretentious or vapidly bizarre, they keep saying. There is some truth in this; but such generalisations tend to deliberately turn a blind eye to the few vigorous, questioning, wholesomely

disruptive or vibrant and technically innovative shows the festival hosts every year. This year, Sulayman Al-Bassam's *The Hamlet Summit*, Kris Niklison's *Neverland* and Ola Mafaalni's *The Merchant of Venice* were examples of this category of exceptional productions.

The first cleverly rewrites the text, foregrounding the cynical political level, sardonically embedded in Shakespeare's play, and transposes the kingdom of Denmark in space and time to the turbulent and beleaguered Middle East of the present, to investigate the relationship between the political tyranny, decadence and corruption of Arab military dictatorships, which make their countries an easy prey to Western greed and exploitation, the Israeli occupation of Palestinian land, spearheaded by religious fanaticism, and the resurgence of Islamic fundamentalism and 'Jihad' as a reaction against internal and external oppression, mounting frustration, a sense of disillusionment with the old order of things and an excruciating feeling of political helplessness and futility. In his director's note, Al-Bassam (born to an English mother and a Kuwaiti father) elucidates the vision that prompted this passionately angry, poignantly moving and exquisitely written and staged piece. "We are living in an age of political charades, where the emphasis on 'spin', public opinion focus groups and the so-called transparency of government hides a callous agenda of economic and political barbarism. In the recent scramble to unite world opinion behind "America's war on terrorism," he goes on to explain, "the slogan mentality that pitches good against evil, crusades against Jihad presents us with a world split into two halves, each baying for the other's blood."

The second, *Neverland*, is an irresistible compound of magic, human grace, and sheer animal energy conjured up by Niklison and four other wizardly performers. It weds together the arts of dance, story- telling, stand-up comedians and the circus, as well as video projections and cartoon films, and blends humour with gentle pathos, technical sophistication with endearing naivete, and skilful staging effects with a pervasive illusion of complete spontaneity. Like Kris's earlier one-woman show, which won her the best actress award at a previous CIFET, this one is highly personal, strung out her memories, anxieties, dreams and fears, which she directly confides to the audience, and interspersed with hilarious anecdotes and colourful visual images, composed of movement and light, of breath-taking beauty. The focus in her earlier show was on sexual identity and how the way we are made to dress by society from birth arbitrarily defines it and is imposes gender-specific roles, spaces and physical and psychological patterns of behaviour. This time she chose a lighter theme: the dream of happiness and the fulfillment of impossible dreams. As she chattily shares with us the troubles, frustrations and adventures she had preparing this show with her actors in the jungle in Brazil, she impresses upon us that it is only in the wonderous neverland of art that the impossible can happen and happiness can be found. Thanks to her clever and warm interaction with the audience, by the end of the show, we all feel that she and her actors are old friends. So when a cake with lighted candles is brought in and we are told it is her birthday (it was also her birthday the night before and when I saw the show in Holland in June), we all join in the party. The performers embrace the spectators and all join in a dance. It is to the credit of the show and a proof of its intrinsic power that despite the many technical disasters, including

several brief power failures, which it suffered on the night the jury was there, taking away some of the magic (and making me, who had seen it in its full glory, literally sick), it still worked wonderfully, thrilling and delighting the audience and infecting them with its irrepressible energy. It seems to me that Kris has found the secret formula for making theatre into a communal celebration – a formula much talked about and long sought after by Arab dramatists, directors and theatre theoreticians, but rarely achieved.

In contrast, Mafaalani's *Merchant* derives its power from an almost puritanical shunning of any manifestation of vitality, warmth or colour and an extreme economy in movement. Sidestepping the racial issue (the word Jew is never mentioned in the dialogue and Shylock is simply an alien of sorts), Mafaalani presents Western capitalist society as a cold, coarse and money-obsessed world, dimly lighted and enveloped in clouds of cigarette smoke, like a dark cavern where the sun never shines and no flower can survive. The inhabitants of this shadowy, desolate world seem to have been depleted of all physical energy by the pursuit of money; except for Portia, who moves lethargically about in high heels and a revealing evening dress, baring her black-stockinged legs, in a mechanical gesture of seduction as she enacts the caskets episode and a few other scenes, and Jessica and Lorenzo when they woodenly parody the romantic balcony scene against what looks like a gigantic metal cage or the iron skeleton of a skyscraper (which, with a card-table in front of it, make up the whole of the set), all the characters Mafaalani kept of the original text seemed chained to the gambling table for the most part of the performance, speaking their lines and acting their scenes around it as they dealt out the cards or slouched in their seats, and only leaving it briefly (and reluctantly, it seemed) when the

dramatic logic of the action made it absolutely necessary that they do. I cannot say I 'enjoyed' this show – enjoyment is a word one can hardly use in connection with it; but it was stark, powerful and convincing and I found the vague ironical visual suggestion of a parody of a black and white fifties American gangster movie perversely amusing.

The Hamlet Summit, *Neverland* and *The Merchant of Venice* represented different countries in the contest and display diverse artistic temperaments and approaches to theatre. But their creators do have one thing in common: all are expatriates, bestriding two different cultures and communicating in two languages at least. Al-Bassam is an Anglo-Kuwaiti, speaks English and Arabic, works and lives in Britain while maintaining close contracts with Kuwait; Niklison is an Argentine, speaks Spanish, Dutch and English, lives and works in Holland and frequently tours; and Mafaalani is a Syrian, brought up in Germany, living and working now in Holland and speaks German, Dutch and English, but little Arabic. Eugenio Barba – an Italian who studied in Poland with Grotowski, lived in Norway for a while, then founded the famous Odin Teatret in Denmark and married an Englishwoman – always tells his students that for an artist to find his/her own true path and discover their unique creativity, they have to step out of their own cultures, at least for a time, and cross over to another or others. Though it sounds paradoxical, this gives them a better understanding of their mother culture by forcing them to view it from a different perspective.

For many of our young artists (whose lively presence, curiosity and enthusiasm make the festival worthwhile for me) who value the festival as a way to achieve a movement, rather than a monument, and who ask, look, feel, discuss and listen to what goes on around them, as

Ten Cate advises, this lesson of voluntary alientation as a route to a more profound understanding of themselves, their culture and their art, to a deeper engagement with the world and a genuine sense of belonging in it, was one of the valuable side benefits of this year's CIFET. Another was an informal meeting between representatives of six independent theatre troupes and a group of sympathetic theatre experts and professionals from Europe, masterminded by Professor Mike Kolk, from Amsterdam university and one of the guest speakers at the central seminar. A close friend of Ten Cate, she shares his belief that "only a movement from the heart" can bring artists together and make cultural interaction – the declared goal of the festival – work. And as if to consolidate the alienation lesson indirectly transmitted by the three shows I mentioned, along with her came Karen Johnson (member of the jury) – an English director, working in various parts of Europe, married to a Dutch and living in Holland; Ginka Tscholakowa-Henle (the head of the jury) – a Bulgarian playwright, director, translator, and documentary film-maker and widow of the late famous German playwright Heiner Muller, living in Germany where she runs the Heiner Muller foundation, and doing work in other parts of Europe as well; there was also the artistic director of the Dutch Dogtroep theatre which specialises in site-specific productions. It was a warm, friendly, constructive meeting in which the young artists unburdened their hearts to their sympathetic listeners and spoke freely of their needs and handicaps. Out of this, a project was born: a course in arts management – what the young artists said they mostly needed – to start this October at the Embassy of The Netherlands and no fees. With such encouraging side benefits forthcoming and that modicum of real theatre which yields knowledge beyond what is seen on the boards, not to mention the new

friends and contacts anyone who cares to take the trouble makes, before, after and in between performances, one can try to ignore the negative aspects of CIFET, however glaring – the contest and all its problems, the furious or heart-rending complaints of artists about the allocation of unsuitable venues, the dirt and layers of solidified dust they have to put up with, the lack of technical equipment, and the ineptness and maddening indifference of theatre technicians and stagehands. Whatever its faults or what its critics say, CIFET remains worthwhile, not for intellectuals and cultural puffs, perhaps, but certainly for young artists and theatre lovers.

Chain-Stitch

Ibsen's *Ghosts* at the AUC*

In the 1992 Free theatre Festival, Abeer Ali and her independent El-Misaharaty troupe staged an adaptation of Ibsen's 1881 *Ghosts*. Instead of the countryside round Bergen, the rainiest part of Norway, in the late 19^{th} Century, the play, which Ibsen once described to a friend as "a family story, as grey and gloomy as this rainy day", was remade into a black comedy, in colloquial Arabic, and reset in a popular quarter of Cairo, on a sultry summer evening in the 1980s. The dissolute Captain Alving was revived and remodelled on "Si El-Sayed", the hypocritical, tyrannical head of the family who leads a double life in the famous *Trilogy* of novels which won Naguib Mahfouz the Nobel Prize for literature in 1988. The new Mrs. Alving, however, was far from the docile, acquiescent Si El-Sayed's spouse, Amina. Equally oppressed and illiterate, with physical violence as an added scourage, she retained the rebellious spirit, critical discernment, power of introspection and independent thinking of Ibsen's heroine.

The plot was drastically altered and refashioned into a dramatic monologue for one actress, centering on moral hypocrisy and made up of a string of short narratives to illustrate its damaging effect on the life of the heroine and all around her. The monologue was punctuated with the fleeting, shadowy appearance of silent, ghostlike figures, grotesquely impersonating the people she talks about, and interspersed with embarrassing, personal questions directed at the audience with a

* 20.3.2003. In English.

confidential wink to get them to express their views. For realism, Abeer Ali substituted expressionism, and in her new scheme of things, there was no place for Osvald, the story of his estrangement from home at the age of seven or the curse of syphilis bequeathed to him by his father, for Captain Alving's illegitimate daughter Regina and her fake father Engstrand, or the story of Mrs. Alving's flight from home to seek refuge with Pastor Manders and his taking her back despite their mutual attachment. Moreover, *Egyptian Ghosts* ended on a frenzied note, in a kind of audio-visual conflagration, with a *Zar*, an African female traditional ritual for exorcising ghosts and evil spirits. Indeed, by the time Ali and her group had finished working on it, Ibsen's play had become a ghost of its former self and was completely sunk into the new performance text, leaving no visible traces behind – perhaps only a few ripples.

No wonder so many people failed to see the connection between the Norwegian and Egyptian *Ghosts*; but for Ali they were identical despite all the changes she made and the pronounced feminist viewpoint she adopted. Both were basically a protest against the iron grip of traditional, conservative, bourgeois morality with its false, hypocritical ideals and oppressive valorization of "duty", particularly where women are concerned. Both set out to prove that such inherited value-systems as are foisted on us cripple the mind, deplete the soul and shrivel the body, robbing our lives of joy and vitality. The rigid middle-class mores which spoilt Mrs. Alving's life in 19th Century Norway, Abeer believes, still rule the lives of most Egyptian families in urban and rural areas and continue to breed deception, frustration and untold unhappiness. Mrs. Alving, she asserts, could be speaking about our own society and way of life when she says: "we're all ghosts ...; it's

not only the things that we've inherited from our fathers and mothers that live on in us, but all sorts of old dead ideas and old dead beliefs, and things of that sort. They're not actually alive in us, but they're rooted there all the same, and we can't rid ourselves of them. I've only to pick up a newspaper and when I read it I seem to see ghosts gliding between the lines. I should think there must be ghosts all over the country — as countless as grains of sand. And we are, all of us, so pitifully afraid of the light."

Egyptian Ghosts was performed twice, on two successive evenings, at El-Tali'a theatre during that 1992 festival and it caused quite a stir. The audience was socially and economically varied, but consisted mostly of young people, some of whom had never even heard of Ibsen, and it seemed to touch them on the raw. I remember thinking then what a pity it was Ibsen's plays were never performed in Egypt and wondered if our producers and directors thought him as dangerously iconoclastic and subversive as his own contemporaries did a century ago. When *Ghosts* was first published, it was thought too shocking to perform; none of the Scandinavian theatres would touch it. Its first performance, in May 1982, did not take place in Norway or anywhere in Europe, but in Chicago, and when it finally reached London, it was lambasted by the critics and dubbed "naked loathsomeness" and "an open sewer". In Egypt, it wasn't until last week, well over a century after its publication, that the play found a director willing to stage it in toto, undoctored, and give it its much belated Egyptian premiere.

In choosing *Ghosts*, rather than any other Ibsen play, Mahmoud El-Lozy was prompted by very much the same feelings as Abeer Ali ten

years ago. In an interview (published last week), he said: "I hope the audience ... will appreciate Ibsen's ironic sense of humour, how he destroys icons that are still with us, and that it will help at least some of the people there to see into the hypocrisy of their own society and double standards." To achieve this and allow the play to "disturb" people now as it did back in the 19th Century, El-Lozy cut a low profile as director, faithfully following Ibsen's conception, realistic mode and stage directions. Most of his work concentrated on the acting, its emotional timbre, rhythm and ironic undercurrents and on providing his actors with a fitting visual frame that can support them and enhance their performances.

For this, he enlisted the talents of costume designer Jeanne Arnold and set and lighting designer Stancil Campbell. Arnold provided period costumes in emblematic colours which hinted at each character's temperament and place in the thematic scheme of the play — black (for Mrs. Alving and Pastor Manders who remain the hostages of ghosts, turquoise (for Regina) who finally walks out of the haunted house to seek the joy of living under the open, blue skies, dusty brown (for Engstrand), a nondescript, wishy-washy colour like his character, and a bright red velvet coat which stood out among the rest for Osvald. That red coat was a brilliant touch which visually set him apart from the other characters, as the play does, while significantly linking him to the crimson flowers in the vases, to the red and orange flames in the fireplace and in the background of the portrait of his father which hangs over the mantelpiece, as well as to the reflected auburn glare of the burning orphanage. These visual links vividly spelt out, in terms of colour, Osvald's longings and fears, hinted early on at his fate and

made his collapse (or snuffing out) at the end seem inevitable on a purely sensuous level and, therefore, all the more pathetic.

Likewise, the elegant set was more than just beautiful or functional. While basically sticking to Ibsen's instructions about its layout, Campbell chose a cunning colour scheme in which the drab gray walls and doors which framed the scene stood in sharp contrast with its cheerful, graceful contents — the cosy fireplace, the brown and cream sofas, the delicate lace table covers, and the vases of flowers and many potted plants. The contrast transformed the set into an eloquent visual metaphor for the lives of the characters in the play where the joy of living is always curbed and hemmed in by dead ideas or crushed under the lead weight of moral conventions. Though, like the grey walls, they are meant as a protective shield, these conventions, the stage image further tells us, are no more than a cover that hides shameful secrets, pain and misery. On the other hand, the contrast between the look of the tidy, ordered drawing room and the stories we hear of what happens behind its solid, grey walls and closed doors visually enforces our awareness of the double standards and false pretences which govern the world of the characters.

Throughout the play, this room, which opens on a conservatory, awash with tamed and protected potted plants (probably "ensured" like the rest of Mrs. Alving's possessions), with a door leading into an invisible garden, swimming in darkness all the time except for the distant, flickering glare of the fire which consumes the orphanage at the end of Act Two, was a potent element which coloured our reception of what the actors said. Indeed, with the costumes and sensitive

manipulation of the lighting, it created a stage image so powerful and suggestive that it seemed to provide subtle comments on what was happening, speak what the characters left unsaid, or ironically undercut the dialogue.

Within such a framework, and with a director of long experience in attendance, carefully guiding their steps along this rough terrain of a text, the actors could only come out safe at the other end. Mariam Ali Mahmoud and Ramsi Lehner as Mrs. Alving and Pastor Manders faced a terrible challenge and struggled valiantly to meet it. It didn't make it any easier that all the scenes they shared (more than half of the play and quite crucial ones in terms of confrontations and revelations) seem to proceed on a double-track, so to speak, and lead in opposite emotional directions. While Mrs. Alving is intended to arouse our sympathy, Pastor Manders is supposed to provoke irony and satirical laughter. Needless to say, the two emotions are antithetical and tend to work against each other. Indeed, in some cases, Mrs. Alving becomes a kind of *agent provocateur* of satire in her relation to Manders, and the emotional impact of her anguished revelations, as they shock the smug and pompous pastor, is cancelled out by the hilarious laughter his reactions provoke. That one was aware of this was no fault of Mariam or Ramsi. Even Dame Peggy Ashcroft whom I saw as Mrs. Alving in the 1960s found it difficult to override this tricky double track. Considering their youth and relative inexperience, they did extremely well and so did the rest of the cast: Ratko Ivekovic as Osvald, Soraya Morayef as Regina and Shadi Alfons as Engstrand. I was particularly thankful for the clear enunciation which allowed you to hear every word however fast the actors spoke.

The thing that really bugged me in this production had nothing to do with the text, the cast or artistic crew; it had to do with the play being performed in the wrong language to the wrong audience — or at least, to the kind of audience who seemed least to need it. To be truly subversive and disturbing as it was in the 19th Century, to be able to shake up people out of their moral lethargy as Ibsen intended it and El-Lozy meant it to be, *Ghosts*, needs to be delivered in Arabic, to a wider audience, in a more popular venue than El-Falaki Centre of the AUC.

The Way of All Flesh

Norways Pli A Pli at Al-Gomhoria theatre*

In an O. Henry award-winning short story called *To Be*, American writer Barbara Grizoni Harrison came up with the startling expression: "I love my daughter's flesh." At first, it sounded to me so utterly reductive and, indeed, repulsive. But, gradually, on reflection, I came to see the simple wisdom of this unusual pronouncement. Though we may not want to admit it, particularly in an anti-body culture like ours, the simple truth is that whatever we may imagine we know about anybody, even our own children, is transmitted to us through that weak, finite, ephemeral thing we call 'human flesh'.

For years I have been bothered by modern dance. It seemed to me it had explored all the possible twists and contortions of the human body and was growing tediously repetitive. After all, how many movements can the human limbs perform; you can fling your arms and legs in such and such direction, bend, sway, jump, roll and crouch in whatever humanly possible ways, but then, there is an end to all convolutions. However, if one is brought up to regard the body as a mere dispensable vehicle, a paltry concoction of water and dust, then modern dance, with its revelling glorification of that finite vessel, becomes an essential need. Regardless of whatever message or meaning you may glean from such performances, what really matters and is of staying value is this celebration of pure physicality.

* June 2003.

The trouble with modern dance, however, is that it comes packaged in thick wrappings of fulsome praise and weird, esoteric hype which seems intent on disguising its simple truth, that is, its inherent physicality. It is as if you could not sell a modern dance show unless you clothed it in highfalutin, obfuscating linguistic robes and invested it with spiritual, philosophical or mystical intents. I think life would be much easier if we stopped looking for deeper meanings in dance shows and accepted them for what they essentially are — celebrations of the glory of the flesh.

Such musings proved liberating in my case. I went to see Norway's *Pli A Pli* not to look for Ingun Bjornsgaard's "athematic concentration on the tension between the private and the universal", as the publicity excerpt printed in the festival's catalogue says, but to simply enjoy that vital reassurance of the dignity and great plastic potential of the human body. I got what I wanted and loved the care-free, unaffected and humorous grace of her dancers, their suppleness and exquisite contours; and for an added bonus, Bjornsgaard gave me a few graphic images to take home with me. Apart from the thoroughly exhausted body-to-body interaction, which in this case was exuberant, deliciously ironical and openly theatrical (indeed, the whole show came across as a dress rehearsal behind the scenes), there was an inventive exploration of body-to-object interaction. The dancer with the length of shiny fabric at the beginning seemed to carve a route back to a pre-linguistic stage, when we gave to objects the same dignity and importance as ourselves and treated them as autonomous entities with a will of their own. The willful, recalcitrant bit of cloth kept eluding any definitive identity-label as the skilful dancer handled it, or rather, interacted with it, becoming a dress, a shroud and a death sheet before

suddenly disappearing. Of course you can invest this seemingly simple, childish sequence with as many cultural connotations as you like; but the delightful fact remains, and this is one of the show's triumphs, that the materiality of the cloth and the semi nude body dealing with it were never allowed to be forgotten.

If you ask me what *Pli A Pli* was all about (a question I have always found silly and irritating), I will tell you simply that it was about bodies, what we choose to clothe them in and how this affects our movements, postures, physical responses and inner emotions. This is perhaps what made the final sequence where one of the dancers methodically steals the jewellery, shoes, shawls and even petticoats of the elegantly dressed, seemingly dead women, slumped on chairs, limply leaning against a wall, or lying prostrate on the floor, so riveting. Significantly, what ends the show is the flick of a fan.

Toasting Independence

The first Euro-Mediterranean Creative Forum for Independent Theatre Groups at the Bibliotheca Alexandrina*

Great idea to get independent theatre groups from Europe, Egypt and the Arab world, closet them together in a certain space and give them a week to pool their experiences, exchange ideas and ponder present problems and future challenges. Admittedly the idea is not new. For some years now, the Jordanian Fawanees theatre, in collaboration with the Egyptian Al-Warsha, have been arranging an annual event along the same line and have managed to create a valuable forum for intellectual and artistic dialogue, and even political confrontation. Last year, Nora Amin picked up the thread and organised, with the help of some foreign cultural agencies — mainly the Royal Netherlands Cultural Fund, ProHelvetia, the Goethe Institute, the AUC and the British Council — the Jadayel festival in downtown Cairo. In the wake of it, Mahmoud Abu Doma, the director of the theatre programme at Bibliotheca Alexandrina, hosted a number of productions by Egyptian independent theatre groups for a week. The event was so successful that he thought of developing it into a kind of international encounter.

Talk of snowballing. But it also makes sense as intercultural dialogue and cooperation have been articles of faith for the majority of these groups since their incipience, back in the 1980s. Many of them would not have seen the light of day, or had the chance to air their

* 8.1.2004. In various languages.

talents without the support of Foreign, mainly European, cultural centres. Through these centers, they got not only financial support, meagre in most cases, but, more importantly, respect, a sympathetic ear, a space to work, a form of protection, opportunities for training and developing skills, and the enthusiastic encouragement of many guest European artists and critics. When brilliant director Ahmed El-Attar and his Temple group could not get a foothold in CIFET one year, an article by British critic, Alex Sierz, in a British newspaper (a copy of which was published in the *Weekly* at the time), was a true vindication and proved instrumental in convincing the people in power over here that he was not a figure to be ignored where theatre, especially experimental theatre, was concerned. Two years later, he was invited by the official, state-run Avant-garde theatre (El-Tali'a) to present a show under their name and become a candidate for nomination in the festival's international contest. The same thing happened to Intisar Abdel-Fattah, Mohamed Abul-Su'ood, Hani El-Mettenawy, Abeer Ali and Hani Ghanem — all founders of independent theatre groups and pioneers of the Free Theatre Movement in Egypt.

Doma himself could not have launched his Alternative Theatre group in Alexandria, long before he became associated with Bibliotheca Alexandrina, without the support of the Swedish and Goethe Institutes in Alexandria and, of course, the Jesuit Cultural Centre. Though he keeps his group and work as director well away from the Library and conscientiously separates his work as director and creative artist from his job as theatre programmer, he is profoundly aware of the value of cultural exchange and keenly cognizant of the problems of his fellow free theatre champions and anxious to help them. He was there in 1990, at the launching of the first Free Theatre Festival, performing with his

Alternative Theatre group his little jewel of a play, *The Castaways*, at the Open Theatre of the Opera House. In preparation for this forum, of the value of which he managed to convince Ismail Sirag Eddin, the head of the Library and Sherif Mohei Eddin, the director of the arts programme, he attended two independent theatre festivals in Slovenia and Romania last year, sent an open invitation on the Bibliothetca's website and watched nearly 24 videos from prospective participants. The budget was small; this was going to be an all-Library-sponsored thing, paid for from the funds allocated to his theatre programme. Slightly over 100,000 Egyptian pound was all he had.

The festival would be small-scale in terms of the number of shows and accommodation would be clean and comfortable but far from sumptuous, he thought. He could not hope to compete with CIFET's 5-star hotel accommodation, but the guests' rooms would be central, within walking distance of everything, with room-service facilities at affordable prices. Instinctively, or may be from experience, he knew how independent groups, most of them financially struggling, with an acute economic sense and a predilection for frugality and thrift, would feel uncomfortable being housed at the Sheraton or Palestine. They would feel unaccountably guilty and would always be thinking of how the money paid for their accommodation could have been put to better use in their work. It would also put them in a false position and make them feel so poor; a cup of coffee in these posh places costs so much. I remember how Mary Elias, a Palestinian critic and professor of theatre living in Syria, complained to me once about being housed at the Cairo Sheraton. "Theatre people don't have so much money," she said. She felt awed and browbeaten somehow. "It is so humiliating not to be able to invite the young journalist interviewing you to a cup of coffee

because it costs the earth here (at the Sheraton)," she moaned. No danger of that when Doma is around. She had also complained about the food. "A modest *per deim* would solve the problem," she had added.

Doma's guests were not forced to put up with hotel food and meal times. He guaranteed they would have decent rooms and a good breakfast. For the rest of the meals and local transportation, every guest was given EL. 100 per-day. Put money in their purses and let them eat and drink what they like was his motto. He would have liked to give more; but there it was; the budget was limited. Curiously, everybody was happy to have this freedom. And with plenty of wholesome, delicious food all around, at really ridiculous prices, some members of the Egyptian groups managed to have a good time and even save some of the money for other uses or future projects. No one felt sinful about the Library squandering tax-payers' money on them or putting more money into feeding the guests than in supporting the arts. The logistics perfectly fitted the psychology of the struggle for independence.

And what better timing to choose than the end of a year and the dawning of a new one? The first 4 days were taken up with getting settled in, getting to know each other, the Library and the city. There were also two interesting morning lectures-demonstrations: one on "Theatre and Personal Experience," by Dr. Angela Waldegg, — a seasoned Austrian independent theatre fighter who founded her company in 1975 and is still finding it rough and seeking the solidarity of younger generations from different climes — and another, "Dance theatre: scenes from Sweden," by Marika Hedemyr, on the development of this art in her country, with plenty of videotaped

material. For the young and robust, the keen and assiduous, Doma also provided an intensive 2-day workshop on "Improvisation: spontaneous and creative acting" conducted by the same Dr. Waldegg. Both the lectures and workshop were well attended, with the Egyptian contingent of independent groups always taking the lead and proving the most avid. It was heartwarming to see them every morning trooping to the Library, some deep in earnest conversation, some laughing, dancing and clowning along the corniche. At lunch time, they would be at *Mihatit El-Raml* or *Rue Safiya Zaghloul* grabbing a sandwich at one of its many small food shops or enjoying a glass of tea and a quick water-pipe at the *baladi* seaside café next to Windsor hotel.

In the evening, everyone, young and old, artist or critic, would be at the Library, in the Great or Middle hall, watching a show or two. For the first four days it was all dance and I admit I started getting restive. Everyone was asking Doma if this was meant as a modern dance festival. "Wait," he said, "there will be plenty of 'talking' theatre later." And he was up to his word. The festival opened at the Great Hall with *Laundry News*, by an Egyptian independent group called Stones. It was the first time I hear the name, and I do get around. Who were they? When did they start? And how come I never heard about them before? I frantically asked myself. The title of their show too was tantalising — humorous, audacious and tongue-in-cheek. I looked forward to their show but unfortunately missed it. I couldn't make the 2 o'clock fast train and had to take the next at 7 p.m. By the time I got to Alexandria, everything had finished. You cannot imagine my frustration. It was not until the following morning that the Stones mystery was dispelled. I met them all at breakfast, all dancers in Walid Aouni's Opera dance company. Their show had had a 3-day run at Al-Gomhoria theatre just

before the festival and I remembered Aouni calling to invite me. What have they got to do with 'independence'? It is part of Aouni's policy to encourage his dancers to air their choreographic talents and he has already launched Mohamed Shafiq on an international choreographic career and helped others in his company to stage a lovely piece called *The Wardrobe*.

The close professional association of all the members of *Stones* with the Opera House raised many question marks, calling their 'independent' tag into question and making it seem somewhat dubious. They are all very good dancers and charming people. But you cannot have it both ways: be a member of the largest and richest theatrical establishment in Egypt and pose at the same time as independent. The four subsequent performances had no such puzzling clouds hanging over them and you could enjoy them, or otherwise, with a clear conscience.

The Griffon Dance Company's *Tupper* from Greece, which featured a fridge, a cooker and a toilet and grappled with the tensions of family life, rendering them through a varied kinetic vocabulary drawn from daily life, automation and the animal world; Ana Trojnar's Solo Dance Company's *Flight* from Slovenia — a sequence of four dances, drawing on different dance traditions and cultural heritages and connected with readings from Tagore's *Songs of Suffering*, with a lonely candle in a metal tray, exquisite fabrics, and a lapful of sand which the reader, Maja Gal Tromar, let trickle out of her hand to the floor presumably to indicate the passage of time; Karim El-Tonsi's *Still Here ... A Tribute to Saffo Bertoni* (his grandmother who brought him up and who died a few months ago) — an agonized, somewhat

confused piece which dwells on the themes of absence and presence, loss and grief, and of which the most moving sequence was the first in which the empty wicker chairs and the heaps of clothes to be rid of touched a deep chord in everyone's heart; and Roberto Casarotto's *Sidra* from Italy — an ascetic, quasi-mystical piece, with a bare table, a red apple and a lone dancer (plenty of room for interpretation and hunting symbols — all four spectacles, whether you liked them or not, and whatever your aesthetic or intellectual reservations were worth inviting. They were modest, brief shows, yes; but in each of them there was a flicker, something genuine and deeply felt, a kind of striving, of reaching out to capture a fugitive idea, a haunting image, some inscrutable meaning. They were not finished, polished, spectacular works, ready to be displayed in the shop-window of the festival, as is the case in Avignon, Edinburgh, Zurich, or any international theatre market. But for people for whom theatre is life, who understand that 'performance' is no longer simply a profession, a profitable career, a form of entertainment, but a way of life which helps deconstruct ideology, power structures and liberate the individual, even at the cost of pitching him or her in a process of ceaseless struggle for relative understanding and a modicum of integrity and dignity, those performances meant something and had relevance.

On new year's eve, everyone was looking forward to Antonin Novotny's *What is White Dog's Shit Really Meant to be For.* It sounded like a wonderful farewell message to 2003 with all the shit it had unearthed. Antonin, however, missed his flight (the Czech airlines are notorious for such lousy practical jokes); we never got to know what the white dog's shit really meant and it became for everybody a kind or irking mystery — as if the whole future of humanity and

everyone's luck in the new year depended on it. But I, at least, could console myself with the prospect of watching Roberto's piece which I had missed on the first day. Then, Christmas eve, a concert with Niven Allouba and Rida El-Wakil, with Sherif Mohieddin conducting. Afterwards, a party at the Greek Club opposite the Castle of Qaitbay. Not everybody went to that party; some preferred to welcome the new year in a more romantic, less costly vein, with bottles of wine on the sea shore or in some old restaurant or tavern in the popular quarters of Alexandria.

The following day, however, on 1 January, 2004, everyone was there at 1 p.m. at the Round Table in B 1 to really get talking. Mediating the discussion and doing a good job translating was actress and critic Maysa Zaki. It was there that I discovered that Dr. Angela was about to lose her space in Austria which she has struggled to keep since 1975. The upshot was that regardless of whether you came from the first or third world, if you chose independence the problems would be the same. A game of cops and robbers, is how Nadir Omran of the Jordanian Fawanees Group designated the relationship between independent groups and the power structures in any society or culture. Future prospects seemed grim, everyone concurred, in view of the deplorable swing to the right worldwide. Such depressing mediations could not, however, quell the spirit of positive camaraderie that was building up in the room. The pursuit of independence may not lead anywhere and could not by definition rest still and smugly expect laurels. But there are countless rewards on the road and showers of priceless gifts that you could not trade for money on any market. That evening, the Pygmalion Theatre from Romania seemed to have designed its adaptation of Kafka's *The Castle* to tell us just this: that in

the midst of despair artists and people can still display and affirm the beauty of life, the glory of human creativity and the value of communal sharing. Out of the absurd, nightmarish situation of waiting, in the shadow of Kafka's mythical, imaginary castle, the Pygmalion actors distilled the essence of black humour, mixed religion and philosophy with buffoonery, and proved that the only brand of wisdom that could help us right now had to be wrenched out of the art of clowning and all manners of fabrication.

The last two days, 2 and 3 January, brought the festival guests into contact with Augusto Boal's Theatre of the Oppressed. Geo Britto, the "Joker" or emissary of that wonderful popular think-tank in Brazil, did another intensive two-day workshop for the benefit of anyone interested in using theatre for empowering the underdogs and remedying social and political ills. Then there was Editta Braun from Austria, with her *Zwei Sonnen* — an anguished, heart-wrenching, lyrical portrayal of the complex relationship of mothers and daughters, rendered with finesse, humour and a bit of visual gimmickry into the bargain, and roping in the issues of time and aging through projections of old family album photographs. This is a recipe that never fails. When Braun brought it to CIFET in 2001, it ran away with the award of best directing. Mr. Nemer Salamun's (an expatriate Syrian living in Spain) and his Teatro del Especreador's *The Supreme Lord of the Rubbish: The Alexandria Container* proved worthy of its name; it managed to metaphorically stink and bore and offend everybody. Salamun's trade is humour, particularly political humour, and he has in his improvisational itineraries through the Arab world forgotten to update himself on the latest jokes. To tell a sophisticated Alexandrian and Cairene audience that his quips and jibes are so daring they could get them all arrested is a

testimony of extreme obtuseness and vapid ignorance. He is not up on the latest joke: the form of democracy in the Arab world which says let them yap all they like but make sure they do nothing. All Salamun's yapping and his rubbish bin were stale and pallid. But The Maska Productions' *Faces from the Sand* from Slovenia was worth staying over till the end. Taking its inspiration from J. L. Borges's *The Circular Ruins*, it unfolded — through dance, mime and verbal monologues — like a miasmic dream, made more lurid for the audience by the fact that at one point one of the *t*wo actresses appeared with a completely uncovered bosom. This proved that the festival shows had not been censored beforehand. What a bonus. The girl, wrapped round the waist, with a bare bosom, looking like a mermaid trying to break free of her semi-aquatic status to join our world, was a memorable image that we carried away with us as we left beautiful Alexandria.

Staging Resistance:

Salwomir Mrozek's *Striptease* at Al-Hanager*

The choice of Salwomir Mrozek's 1961 *Striptease* (in an adapted stage version by Hamada Shousha's troupe) for the opening of the Light Comedy festival (15-22 August) at Al-Hanager was significant and acted as a keynote or a kind of telling epigraph to the whole event. In this tragi-grotesque, ironical, two-character piece, one of the earliest examples of the theatre of the absurd in Polish drama, freedom is the central issue and is examined in relation to power and rebellion. The two nameless characters (simply called 1 and 2) who find themselves suddenly thrust into a room with two doors by a mysterious, invisible force are forced for the first time to meet the challenge of freedom. But, having lived as the slaves of authority all their lives, they fail to take it. Though both doors are open, they act like prisoners and wait to be released by the force that put them there. Despite 1's incessant blabbing about his inner freedom, which he values so much that in order never to limit his range of choices he constantly refuses to act, and 2's vociferous but empty expressions of revolt, both are unable to shake off their deeply ingrained fear of authority and their long habit of submission reduces them to cowardly impotence. When the invisible force materialises as a huge hand which keeps appearing to demand in turn items of their clothing by pointing at them, they meekly surrender and docilely strip until they are reduced to their underpants. Frantic with terror, they finally decide to do something; but rather than rebel, they throw themselves humbly at the mercy of the Hand, kissing it and

* 26.8.2004. In Arabic.

profusely apologising for whatever they could have unwittingly done to offend it. At that moment, a second Hand appears and ominously beckons to them and the two semi-naked, handcuffed men pick up their briefcases and stumble cringingly towards it.

This savagely ironical ending which tells you that power is a multiheaded hydra and that pacifying one master or submission to one tyrant can only bread others was thought too theatrically subdued to satisfy an Egyptian audience. Shousha replaced it with a more graphic physical sequence in which Karim El-Tonsi, who choreographed it and played the Hand throughout, throws the two ends of a long, red scarf round Hani El-Mettenawi and Mohamed Farouk, holding it in the middle and manipulating it so that as they blindly turn round and round they get more and more entangled in it. A bit simplistic and less subtle than the original, this new ending however was visually effective and drew huge applause and loud cheers. In this respect, it matched the opening sequence in which Karim El-Tonsi, dressed in black with a mask, appeared in a pool of red light, amid clouds of smoke, stretching and writhing ominously like an evil spirit — Shousha's metaphor for oppressive political power. The brash chasing after stage effect extended to the movement much of which seemed quite gratuitous and distracting, particularly in the first twenty minutes of the play. The sole motivation behind it seemed to showcase Farouk's athletic prowess; and the same exaggerated vigour infected his vocal delivery which was consistently, inordinately loud. In contrast, El-Mettenawi's performance was smooth, finely-tuned and sophisticated, with every movement, gesture and facial expression carefully calculated. He was alternately smug, ridiculously pompous and painfully pathetic, and whatever the mood he was effortlessly funny. Indeed, much of the political relevance and impact of the play depended on his performance.

A Postscript: Catalan Meditations

Pondering the challenges facing women and the theatre at an international feminist meeting in Barcelona*

For two hectic but amply rewarding days in June, 36 professional women from 14 countries around the Mediterranean met in Barcelona to assess the achievements of women in the 20th century and define the problems, dangers and challenges that they still have to face on the eve of the third millennium. The meetting, held under the title The Century of Women in the Mediterranean, was hosted, and admirably organised, by the Institut Catala de la Doña (The Women Equal Opportunities Institution) of the autonomous government of Catalonia; and the six intensive sessions which covered many areas of human activity in the fields of culture, science, politics, and human rights were held at the Centre de Convencions Winterthur in the presence of a 500-strong audience, mostly female. I wished there had been some men on the panels and more in the audience. The look of the hall faintly suggested a kind of segregation based on gender and reminded me of the singularly uncomfortable feeling I experienced at a couple of theatre seminars held in the Gulf, where I was the only woman. In the case of the Institut Catala de la Doña, however, this is not a deliberate policy of exclusion. The sessions were open to the public regardless of age, race, or gender, and most of the speakers emphasised that their quarrel was not with men but with the coercive and unjust laws and institutions of patriarchy which engender and perpetuate the oppression and exploitation of

* 8.7.1999

women. And, indeed, some papers made glowing references to men who played key roles in the progress and liberation of women, and there were even some passionate personal admissions of gratitude to husbands, fathers, and male friends and colleagues.

What engaged the speakers, whatever their discipline — be it law, science, philosophy, anthropology, history, psychology, social studies, politics, literature, or the arts — was to look for the ground roots of female oppression down history and discuss ways of eradicating them. When Tunisian anthropologist Nozha Sekik described the problems and living conditions of immigrant women from North Africa in France, Italy, and Spain, she clearly pointed out that the root cause of their plight, and what drove them out of their countries in the first place, was a vicious combination of reactionary social, political, economic and religious systems. Neither the government of the home or the host country is willing to do anything to relieve their ignorance, poverty, loneliness and abuse, or even give them access to legal advice. If single, they feel alienated, vulnerable and ostracised; if married to a compatriot, their misery is compounded by having to suffer the anger and frustration of their immigrant husbands, which is invariably vented on them. At the end of Sekik's presentation, a member of the audience who works at a regional clinic catering for an immigrant community in Spain spoke of her dilemma in dealing with her clients. "Many of the women do not speak the language because their husbands forbid them to learn it," she said. One husband told her when she wanted to talk to his wife that he was there to talk for her and added, "If I can speak Spanish, she has no need for it." Her candid words raised the vexing question of cultural identity versus human rights; where does one end and the other begin? How far can one tolerate flagrant abuses of human

rights for fear of impinging on the sanctity of certain traditional beliefs, modes of thinking and ways of life?

These and related questions were taken up by other speakers and tackled from various angles. Margarida Boladeras, a philosopher specialised in bioethics and law, and reader of moral and political philosophy at Barcelona University, traced the roots of female oppression in Western thought and philosophy, exposing many of the fallacies about women that have been passed off as hallowed truths; Nativitat Senserrich, a theologian, also from Barcelona University, corroborated Boladeras's argument by attacking all forms of clericalism and arguing that theologians have often manipulated religion to pass off their ideologically biased interpretations of holy script as holy laws; Khadija Elmadmad, a Moroccan lawyer actively involved in the compaign to change the personal status laws in her country, described the fierce opposition she meets with from religious fundamentalists and other reactionary bodies; Shulamit Aloni, another lawyer, spoke openly against the tyranny of the Jewish ecclesiastical establishment; Maha Abu Dia Shammas, the founder and director of the Palestinian Women's Centre for Legal Aid and Counselling in Jerusalem, spoke of the violence many Arab women suffer in the name of customs and traditions; and Ouiza Cherifi, a professor of chemistry from Algeria, defiantly declared that Algerian women will go on fighting for a civil society against all odds.

There were many other speakers, equally interesting: a young Catalan biologist from the Department of Medicine at Barcelona University, fighting for the right of women to control their bodies and reproduction; another young psychoanalyst who discussed the

problems of female adolescents in choosing a model for the self from among the many projected by the media; the Catalan demographer Anna Cabre, who discussed the stereotyping of women according to age and personal status; a sociologist who described in painful detail the exploitation of female street children in Mexico and other countries she worked in; a charming topographer from Greece, Leda Yannakopoulou, who surveyed the history of Greek women and spoke of the generation gaps between females in the same family, urging tolerance ... And many, many others.

At the end of the two days, we had covered so much ground and so many topics that Marta Pessarrodona, the coordinator of the meeting and Joaquima Alemany i Roca, the president of the Institut Catala de la Doña, found it very difficult to make a comprehensive summary. Nevertheless, a genuine dialogue and exchange of ideas had taken place and a common ground been discovered. Many friendships too had been forged. It was reassuring to be among so many intelligent and dedicated women who, despite their different faiths and cultural backgrounds, were fully alive to the danger of theocracies, deeply suspicious of authoritarianism under whatever guise, willing to radically question the patriarchal heritage in its most sensitive areas, and who firmly believed that a civil society was the only guarantee for human rights and the dignity of women. We had a reader in mediaeval history amongst us; after her presentation, I found myself wondering with my Arab colleagues if we had really put the Middle Ages safely behind us. Maha, the Palestinian, remarked that they were only round the corner, ready to pounce on us — as they did in Afghanistan and are trying to do in Algeria — if we were not careful; Ouiza, our Algerian friend, nodded bitterly and talked of the daily horrors she had to put up with, of the

assassination of theatre director Abdel-Qadir Allula and many friends and students, of the mass emigration of artists and the demise of the once thriving Algerian theatre. The Moroccan lawyer, Khadija, reminded us how only a few years ago their leading acctress, Thoraya Gubran, was kidnapped by Islamists who shaved off her hair before releasing her and threatened to kill her if she went back to acting after that. I made a mental comparison between Gubran, who immediately resumed her career despite her traumatic experience, and those Egyptian female performers who penitently turn their back on their art and withdraw from public life. The comparison was so disturbing and depressing and my mind flew for comfort to the memory of Fatma Rushdi, the Sarah Bernhardt of the East. But remembering her glorious stage career, her struggle in 1927 to form a company that carried her name, and her defiant taking on of famous male parts brought no relief. It only made me wonder (as I often did during those two days) if what we call time is the same for everyone and everywhere. I know some places where it has lagged behind; people there have yet to reach the 18th or 19th centuries. But can it move backward in others? Or in small, vicious circles? For nearly 100 years, Egyptian women have fought for many rights, among them a place in the theatre and recognition as artists; and now they are voluntarily relinquishing (with many of their achievements) this place, or turning their back on it in disdain, or abusing it by using it for purposes other than art. It seems we shall have to fight, all over again, many of the battles our brave predecessors fought and thought they had won once and for all. But this time, I hope we shall fight them right, and put time on the right track, making sure it always moves forward and does not suddenly double back upon itself to carry us back to square one. The

presentations at the Barcelona meeting I cited briefly at the beginning point in the right direction. In Egypt, some NGOs, like The Woman and Memory Forum Research Centre, are following the same route; and in the field of theatre there is a new crop of artists, brave young men and women who are not afraid of questioning the basically authoritarian framework of our culture and society, and exposing all the ossified assumptions that underpin the dominant trends of thought which want to carry us back to the Middle Ages.

Will these enlightened forces survive into the third millennium, or will the currents of repression and regression sweep them away?

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